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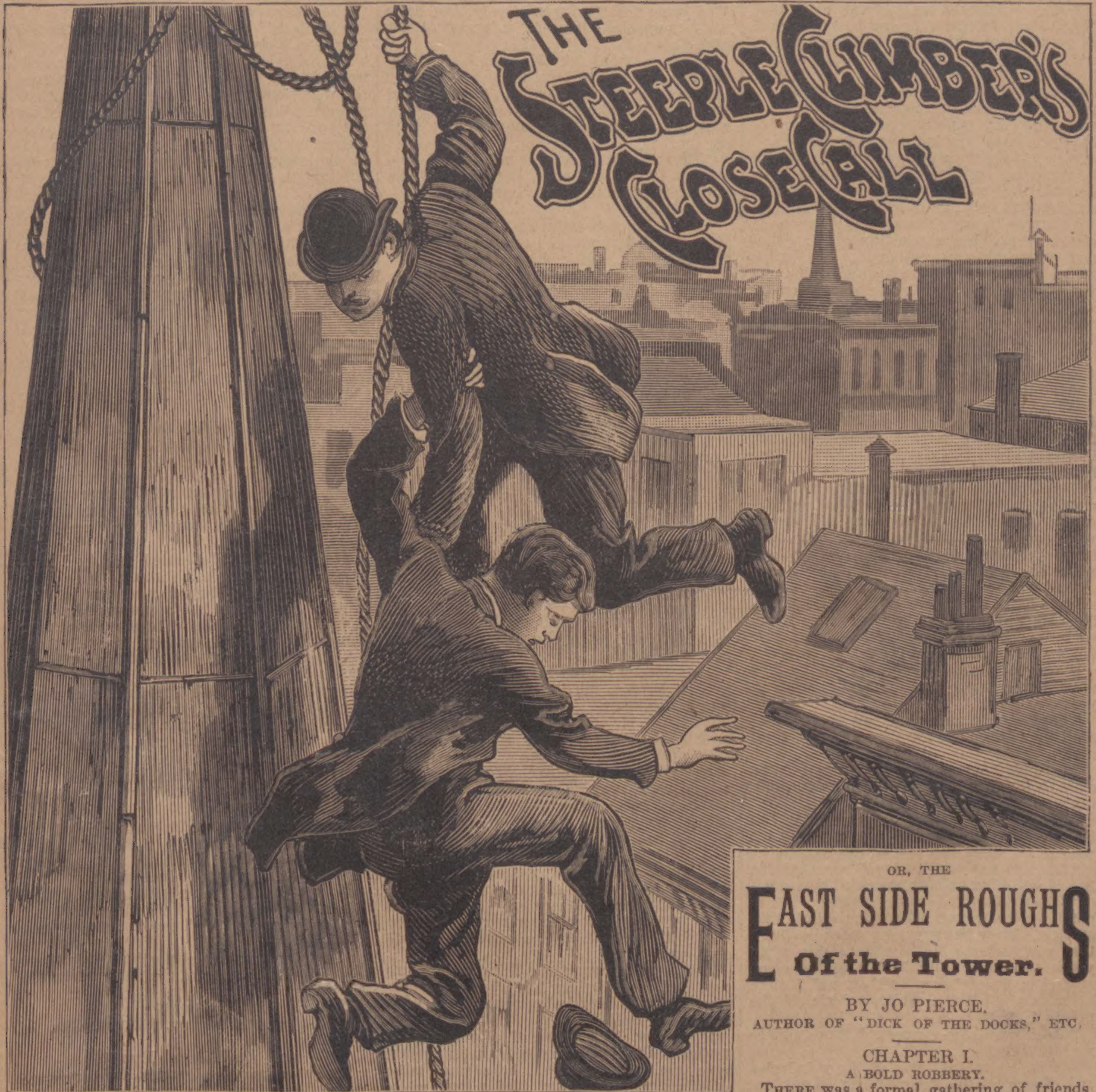
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THE STEEPLE CLIMBER'S CLOSE CALL

OR, THE EAST SIDE ROUGHS Of the Tower.

BY JO PIERCE.
AUTHOR OF "DICK OF THE DOCKS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
A BOLD ROBBERY.

THERE was a formal gathering of friends and neighbors in a house on the "East Side" of New York. Adam Clayton, an old resi-

HE DANGLED OVER THE TERRIBLE CHASM WITH ONLY THE MUTUAL GRASP
TO KEEP HIM FROM SHOOTING DOWN TO DEATH.

dent, had invited the guests to meet his niece, Nina Arvino. The occasion lacked all ostentatiousness, for nobody concerned was "aristocratic," and nobody wanted display, so the none-too-rich people came, all on foot, and acted as sensible persons will on such occasions.

Possibly many would not have come at all, but as Nina was soon to be a bride, that was quite enough to bring out all of the women who had a chance to come, and the women brought the men along with them.

Nina, newly arrived from sunny Italy, was, of course, the center of attraction, but she had to share honors with one other person. Of those present all had been acquainted before their arrival with one exception.

The exception was a young man of about twenty years, finely formed and strong, frank and honest of face, and modest of bearing. When he had been introduced everybody took an interest in him.

"This," Adam Clayton had explained, "is Samuel Osborne, the gentleman who is to paint the steeple of the old church."

And from that moment Samuel was a hero. Painters of the ordinary sort were common, but not those who were so expert and daring in their profession as he was reputed to be. Stories were extant of his success in seeking to reach the top of great business chimneys which had to be repaired, and were so apparently inaccessible that ordinary men dared not and could not ascend them.

Young as he was Samuel had done much of this work. No matter how high a chimney or steeple towered in air, he always found a way of getting up and doing the work required there, for he was a mason as well as painter, and all over several States he had been seen hanging, spider-like, to these tremendously elevated places, looking very small to the crowds that gazed upward, expecting to see him fall and be dashed to pieces.

He had never fallen, and his wonderful success had amazed and deeply impressed the citizens, until, in their admiration, they had given him the nickname of "Sam, the Steeple-Climber."

This was the youth who was at the reception, not because he was an old acquaintance of the family, but because he was to do a work in which all present were interested, and he happened to be there when the evening event took place.

Sam was modest, and tried to avoid the attentions of the party as much as possible. He had been long enough in his work, so he regarded it as matter of fact, and did not care for hero-worship.

It was late in the evening when he was approached by a boy of about thirteen years.

"Say," exclaimed that youth, "nobody ain't introduced me ter you. Do ye know me?"

"I think I have seen you since I came over to the East Side," replied Sam, smiling.

"Very likely. I've been 'round. I'm Dickey Pratt, an' I'm the kid of Joe Pratt, who is ter paint the rest o' the church."

"Glad to see you, Dickey," asserted the Steeple-Climber, giving the boy his hand.

"Ditto, ditto!" declared Dickey. "I'm goin' ter be 'round when you climb that steeple. They do say you go up so high that you look no bigger than a pea when you're way up. I'd like ter be the same sort of a huckleberry as that, an' I shall be nigh you all the while, an' git all the points I kin."

"As far as I am concerned there will be no objection."

"Just so, just so. Say, I like ye'r looks, an' I've got a flea fer ye'r ear. Look out fer Jack Collins!"

"Who the dickens is Jack Collins?"

"He's another steeple-climber, an' he's as mad as a wet hen because he didn't get the job."

"Oh! so that is the pinch?"

"It's more than a pinch; it's a positive smash; an' ef you don't look a good deal out Jack will smash you. Know Jack?"

"No," replied Sam. "I never heard of him before."

"I have, by gum! I know Jack like a book, an' better than that. I told Pop Pratt—that's my dad—that you wanted ter look out fer Jack, fer he would make a ruction, but pop he jest says 'Pooh, pooh!' an' give me the laugh. But, I know Jack, an' I tell ye he is a bad one. He thought he would git the job, because Professor Thomas Jackson favored him, but when the committee give it ter you, Jack was dumped. The committee think that was the last o' Jack. I don't. I know him. Jes' you look out fer Jack! He's bad! See?"

"I have followed you closely, but have you any special reason for mistrusting this Jack Collins?"

"Yes; he tried fer the job himself, an' made a big hustle fer it, an' he's mighty sour because he didn't get it, an' he's just the chap to make a break against a feller who beats him out fer anything he does try for."

"That is not a special reason. I suppose you have no proof by word of his that he intends to do me harm?"

"Well, no."

"Then I guess nothing will go wrong. Men get disappointed in things they try for every day, and it blows over."

"By jing! you don't know Jack. He's a bad one! Look out fer him!"

Just then somebody else wanted to speak with Sam, and the interview with the boy ended.

The other star of the evening, Nina Arvino, continued to receive admiration, as she seemed to deserve it. She was half-Italian of ancestry. Her mother had been the sister of Adam Clayton, and this sister had married a native of Italy, who was in New York long enough to win her affection. She went to live in the famous city of Venice, where Nina had been born and reared.

Both of Nina's parents were dead, and she had come to live with her uncle. He was a plain, moderately successful man, who did business near his home. Nina's parents had been less successful, and about all they left her had been enough money to buy her a new wardrobe and pay her way to New York, with the exception of the family jewels.

Of these the Italian father had possessed quite a supply, all diamonds, and formed into a necklace. They had been in his family for several generations, and had been held to even when the Arvino's lost their fortunes through some political troubles in the year 1812, and there was much pride in their possession.

When Nina lost her parents she became sole owner of the diamonds, and, though she did not care to wear them until she had removed her mourning garments, they had been mentioned somewhat in the neighborhood, and on this occasion had been exhibited to the guests, after which they were put into a drawer of an old secretary at one side of the room under lock and key.

This was the state of affairs at the time that Dickey and Sam had their conversation, though everybody seemed to have forgotten the jewels.

It was at this stage of affairs that a friend of the family noticed a man present who was not recognized. He seemed to be of advanced years, and had a long white beard, and, on the whole, looked so patri-

archal and benevolent that the observer could not help keeping watch of him further.

The old man moved close to the secretary and bent over it.

Just then another person came between him and the guest who had thus noticed him, and the view was momentarily lost, but when another move brought him again into sight the watcher had a shock.

The white-bearded man held a chisel in one hand, and the other member was fumbling in the drawer that held the jewels!

Almost at the same moment the hand came out holding the jewels. The light touched them and a multitude of bright rays flashed out. The man thrust them into his pocket and turned away. Then, too, the watcher noticed that the edge of the drawer was broken and split, and a startling suspicion was aroused.

Then the man with the jewels was making for the window that led into the back yard.

The observer leaped to her feet.

"Robbers!" she cried, shrilly. "Look! The jewels are being carried off!"

The loud outcry, her excited manner and her pointing finger were enough to change the whole current of affairs. Conversation stopped abruptly, and everybody looked to see the cause of the tumult. They saw only the white-bearded man making off deliberately, but the lady who had given the alarm now sprang forward toward him.

"Thieves!" she screamed. "He has the diamond necklace!"

The unknown man quickened his steps a little. He was close to the window, and as it was open and nobody was in the way, he had a clear way of retreat. He reached the opening, he placed a hand on the lower part of the window, and then turned around and faced them for a moment.

"Ef you want the sparklers, come where I go!" he coolly exclaimed.

With this he agilely leaped out of the window.

"Follow him!" cried the alarmist. "He has stolen the diamonds! Look at the secretary!"

The repository was there to answer for itself, and its splintered drawer spoke clearly. There was a movement of the party inside, and a few of them were fully alert.

"Git a gait on!" shouted Dickey Pratt. "Come on! We'll ketch him!"

With this the boy leaped out of the window, and was but a moment quicker than Samuel Osborne. The steeple-climber struck close behind the boy.

"There he goes!" cried Dickey. "Get a hustle on!"

Sam saw him too. The thief was making good use of his legs. He had taken a great risk and knew that only one thing could save him from capture, and that was to run his best.

"Forward!" added Sam, with energy.

"Make ye'r wings flap!" was the boy's advice.

Before them was a line of back yards. Once they had all been inclosed with neat fences, but the people of the vicinity were mostly of the class who had grown careless and few were the fences that did not have breaks, while some had wholly succumbed to decay and tumbled down, thus making free passage.

Along this way the thief had fled; along this way the leaders of the party rushed in pursuit.

Side by side they kept.

"Say," gasped Dickey, "he runs like the wind!"

"We must run faster. Run!"

There was no use of urging, for they were doing their best. So was the thief. He leaped over some fences and clambered

over others, but in all cases he showed mad haste to get clear. Shouts sounded in the rear, and the other guests were to be seen bounding along behind Sam and Dickey. It was a hot hunt, with about everybody in it.

The two leading pursuers showed surprising agility, and they pressed the thief hotly. He had tried to go in a certain direction, but Dickey, knowing there was a break in the line of houses there, had well governed his own movements, and the thief was cut off.

"Hurrah!" shouted the boy, "we've got him!"

CHAPTER II.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE YARD.

The thief turned at bay for a moment. He looked back at his pursuers, and though the darkness of night prevented them from seeing his face, they could well guess that he did not feel at ease.

For a moment it looked as if he might stand where he was and fight it out, but such was not his intention. He wheeled and ran again. Not far from him was an old, rickety shed, and toward this he made. It was good cover for a time, for smaller shanties were all around him, but Sam and Dickey did not hesitate in their rush.

"Look out!" cried somebody from the rear. "He may have a revolver. Look out and not get shot!"

"Keep back, Dickey!" urged Sam. "Let the older ones take the risk."

"Be you goin' ahead?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I go too, you bet your bi-metalism on that!" declared the boy, stoutly.

"But I shall have to take big risks—"

"Ditto, ditto! Go on!"

There was no time to argue, so Sam did not try it farther. They turned the corner of the shed.

"Where's the thief?" called out Dickey.

"Up yonder! He's on the roof. Look out!"

"That's right!" retorted the thief. "Look out! I've got a gun, an' I'll shoot the chump who comes near me. I'm loaded, an' I'll kill. See?"

His white beard had disappeared, and though his face was not to be distinguished clearly, it was plain that he was young. It was no trifling matter to go up against such a person, armed as he doubtless was. Yet Sam did not waver.

"We will see about that," he coolly retorted.

Catching hold of the side of the shed he swung himself up to the top and was only about twenty feet from the burglar.

"I give ye last warning," added the latter. "I don't keer to kill ye, but I'll do it ef you come near me. See?"

"Get down!" ordered Sam.

"I won't!"

"Don't you see we have you surrounded?"

"Don't you see that I'll drop anybody who comes near me?" snapped the thief.

"We are twenty against one, and you are alone."

"That's all right. Come near me, if you dare!"

"For the last time, surrender!"

"Ditto, ditto!" cried Dickey from the ground.

The crook was defiant, but was not at ease. The older members of the broken-up party were close at hand, and the robber was in serious danger, as he well knew.

"Dickey," called out Sam, "you take him from that side. I'll cut off his retreat."

"Here goes!" shouted the plucky boy, advancing at once.

What the Steeple-Climber wanted was to create a diversion, and he thought Dickey would be enough for that purpose.

The boy rushed forward, and, seizing the corner of the shed, began to climb zealously.

"I'm a comin', Hannah!" he recklessly announced.

The thief, turning his head, changed the line of his revolver.

Just the chance Sam wanted, for, on the movement, he leaped forward, but the burglar, too, was on the alert, for, turning, he presented his revolver once more on the Steeple-Climber, and pulled trigger.

Crack! instantly came the sharp report.

Sam ducked so deeply that he almost lost his balance, but the bullet went wild.

In a moment more the Steeple-Climber was by his side, and there would have been a collision but for a mischance. Instinctively the thief stepped back a little when he saw his adversary so near—one step too far, for he reeled and fell from the shed! There was a crash below as he dropped to a smaller shanty.

Sam and Dickey were both left on the roof.

"Git after him!" cried the boy.

"I will. Do you keep back. Stop him down there!"

The last direction was addressed to the other guests who had hurried up, and Sam believed the capture of the thief was certain. In the darkness he was not able to see what had become of the man, but, lingering only a moment, he nimbly leaped down to the lower roof himself.

Eagerly he looked for the rogue, but no rogue was seen!

Sam, of course, understood that the thief had slid to the ground, so again he called to the guests to catch him. Then he took another leap and alighted on the ground. He saw several men close to him.

"Where is he?" the Steeple-Climber demanded.

For answer several of the men fell upon Sam.

"Surrender! surrender!" they cried.

"Hold him fast! Hang to his arms! Don't give him a chance to get off!"

Sam, beaten to the ground by the weight of numbers, shouted to them that he was not the thief, but they were so blinded with excitement and anger that he might as well have kept still.

Finally, however, he writhed from under the load of human flesh and promptly thumped those who would have seized him again.

"Are you blind?" he demanded. "Don't you see who I am?"

"Great guns! it is the Steeple-Climber!" exclaimed a man, blankly.

"Yes, and where's your thief?" cried Sam.

"I don't know."

"You've let him get off while you've hounded me. Confound it, where are your wits and your eyes?"

They stood dumfounded, as well they might be.

"I would have captured him sure, if you had let me alone. Now, I dare say he is gone. Let us look. Open your eyes and search. If he ran it must have been this way," and the Steeple-Climber dashed toward the break in the line of houses.

When he reached the break he saw no sign of the thief, but Dickey was there, crouched on the ground and rubbing his head dolefully.

"Are you hurt?" cried Sam.

"Well, he gave me a poke in the top-knot," mumbled the boy.

"Where is he?"

"He run off through that openin', I reckon he's two blocks off now; he's had plenty of time."

The Steeple-Climber ran to the sidewalk and looked up and down the block. He saw a patrolman and a roundsman placidly nearing the spot, and hastened to them

and poured out his tale rapidly. It stirred them into life.

"He didn't come our way, so he must have gone toward the east," announced the roundsman. "Hasten that way!"

He broke into a run, the patrolman following his example. They speeded down the block as if for a wager. Sam did not go with them. He knew enough of city life and its criminals to feel sure that if the crook was ever caught it must be by slow process; for the time being the thief had made good his escape. Sam turned back toward his associates.

Dickey was on his feet, and though he occasionally rubbed his head, he persisted in declaring that he was all right. The other guests did not feel that they were "all right." They were very sheepish over the blunder which had enabled the burglar to escape.

Sam did not add to their chagrin, but came to business in another way at once.

"Who saw the face of the thief?"

Nobody answered, so he tried again:

"Who can identify him?"

Again there was utter silence, but one of the party held up a false gray beard.

"He left this."

"All of which proves that he was disguised," added Sam. "Now, I'm sure he was a young man—maybe not any older than I am. That's all I can tell. Who can say more?"

"I kin say these gents was clams ter gobble you, instead o' the devastatin' robber!" exclaimed Dickey. "Say, you fellers are dead slow!"

"Let that rest," replied Sam. "We can't do anything by raking up mistakes. Now, as the police have the case outside, back to the house we had better go, for there may be work for us there!"

CHAPTER III.

A STORY OF VENDETTA.

Steeple-Climber Sam, on the lead, soon reached the yard, and broke into the room where the women had remained with a suddenness that made them start.

He entered to find Nina cowering on the floor, heedless of the words of sympathizing woman friends, and swaying to and fro, reiterating, "The vendetta! the vendetta!"

"The vendetta, the vendetta? What does that mean?" demanded Sam.

"The padrone has done it! The padrone has done it!" muttered Nina.

"Common thieves did it," declared Sam; "there is no vendetta business in it! Some of the thieves living right in this neighborhood heard of this party, and, knowing about the diamonds, tried their luck at getting them. How much were the diamonds worth?"

"As near as we can tell, eight thousand dollars. It was all that was left of the past glory and wealth of the Arvino family, and poor Nina's sole inheritance. Now they are gone!"

"Not hopelessly. We may get them back."

"The vendetta!" murmured Nina, still swaying to and fro.

Sam looked at her curiously, to behold a pretty girl, whose Italian blood was so toned down by that of her New York mother that she was but faintly swarthy in complexion. She spoke English with ease and fluency, though with a slight foreign accent.

"What does she mean by the 'vendetta'?" asked Sam. "I know a vendetta is an Italian feud, but what is the particular feud in this case?"

"We don't know," was answered.

Sam advanced to the crouching girl and spoke kindly.

"Miss," he asked, "what is this vendetta that worries you?"

"Ah!" she murmured, "the padrone has done it—Lucio Zacharelli."

"Who is he, and why has he done this? Come, miss, if you want your diamonds back you must tell all you know. Did you see the thief plainly enough to recognize him? Do you know he was this Lucio Zacharelli?"

There was kindly persuasion in his voice, and the girl roused a little to reply:

"I did not see him, but I know it must have been he."

"But why should he do it? How did he know of the diamonds, and has he any grudge against you?"

"Ah! has he not?" cried the Italian girl, her eyes suddenly exhibiting fire. "He hates me because I am an Arvino, and the Arvinos and the Zacharellis are old foes."

"Now you begin to talk. Tell us more. What was the cause of this hatred?"

"I know not; it runs well back. I have heard of it ever since I was a child. Often my mother would clasp me in her arms, if I had briefly strayed beyond her sight, and cry to me: 'Beware of the Zacharellis!' Then, as I grew older, I learned this much—that, long before I was born there was a quarrel between one of the Arvinos and one of the Zacharellis, who was very evil, and in the quarrel they fought, and the Zacharelli was killed. It was this that started the feud, and since then there have been many others killed on each side, and men have fought and died and kept the quarrel and the hatred up."

"I see. A regular Italian cut-throat feud, with numbers on each side and a war to the death. Did your father die this way?"

"No, no! My father never was in it, and my branch of the family was so distant that we never should have been in any manner concerned had not my grandfather been a justice. He sat as judge in a murder trial and sentenced one of the Zacharellis, and that was enough to bring my near relatives into it."

"But why should this Lucio Zacharelli hate you?"

"He was a son of the man my grandfather sentenced to death."

"So the wind blows that way, eh? But he may have forgotten it all."

"Ah, yes, sir! Lucio tried to kill my father, and fled to this land to escape arrest. He has been here ever since, and only a few days ago I met him in the street," explained Nina. "He came close to me, his face lighting up terribly, and he whispered in my ear, 'Vendetta!' Then he passed quickly on, but there was fearful hate in his manner and he will stop at nothing."

"What do you know of him?"

"He is a padrone here. His business is to get Italian laborers for big public works and he has the laborers greatly under his power. Very powerful, is Lucio Zacharelli."

"But would it be the fulfillment of the vendetta to steal the diamonds?"

"It is his first step. He may do more later."

Samuel shook his head.

"If Lucio tries anything more we will give him a life-time in prison, rest assured, and he will have to nurse his vendetta in secret. Vendettas are not allowed in free and law-abiding America. As for the robbery, I do not think he did it. I believe it was the work of the common thieves of New York."

"That's jest it!" broke in Dickey Pratt. "Their earmarks show all over the job. Some o' the thieves of this ward are so flip that they will steal the buttons off from a cop's coat. They did this."

"Who can tell how the thief looked?" continued Sam.

Silence followed the question, and the party looked at the other blankly.

"Find Lucio Zacharelli!" insisted Nina, "and you will find the diamonds. Ah, do find him, so he will not kill me! The vendetta, the vendetta!" iterated the girl, agonizingly.

CHAPTER IV.

WARNED OFF.

When the officers reported, they could only state that they had chased after the robber rather than chased him. He had not been seen. He had made good his escape, and they knew as little of his identity as the guests did.

The case was formally given to the police; the guests made due expression of their regret and took their departure. As they filed out, Dickey Pratt kept close to his new friend, the Steeple-Climber.

"You begin on the old church to-morrow, don't ye?" he asked.

"Yes," Sam answered.

"I want ter help ye."

"But you are not a climber!"

"Oh, I kin learn," responded Dickey. "You know dad is a painter, an' it will come right in my line o' business ter learn your trade; but, anyhow, I want you ter let me help all I kin on this. Won't you need a kid of about my size?"

"There will be a good deal you can do, if you wish, though I shall not allow you to go up the steeple. That is reserved for me, a professional. You can help with the ropes, somewhat, and do other things."

"I am ye'r gazelle! Just count me in. I'll be on hand fer the job right early in the mornin', an' you will see I ain't no slouch at givin' a lift in the—Hello! See that feller comin' there?"

"Yes. What of him?"

"That's Jack Collins, who tried ter git the job away from you. He is a steeple-climber, so he says, though he has lived in this ward all his life an' nobody don't know that he has climbed any great height."

"He appears to want to speak with us."

"So he does, an' you kin bet it is about that steeple. Say, do you look out for him!"

Jack Collins was close at hand. He was a stout, thick-set young man, with a beardless face. Dickey had decried his ability, but he did look resolute enough for even such hazardous work. Approaching Sam, he stopped.

"You're the steeple-climber, ain't ye?" he asked.

"That's my business," answered Sam, quietly.

"Got the job ter that church over there?"

"Yes."

"Say, I'll give ye a fifty ter give it up."

"To give up the job? Why?"

"Because I want it myself. I bid for it, but didn't get it. Ye see, I lived here in this ward, an' they thought home talent was no good, but I'm jest as good as anybody else at this business. See?"

Mr. Jack Collins made known his views with the swagger of the typical tough, and Sam easily sized him up.

"I believe in standing by those who are in my trade," diplomatically replied Sam, "but I do not know your capabilities. I'll take your word, though, and willingly believe you are fit for such work."

"Of course I be! Well, ye see I don't take it kindly to lose the job. I don't like ter be left in my own ward. See?"

"I think I follow you."

"The next thing is, I want that job, an' I'm ready ter do the right thing, ef you be. I'll give ye fifty dollars ter resign in my favor."

"Then where would your profits come in?" practically asked Sam.

"I don't mind that. It ain't a question o' money with me. I want ter git a start in my own ward. Once let them see what I'm good fer an' I shall get all the trade in this section. That's what I want."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Collins, but I don't see that I can do it. I have made a bargain to do the work myself, and I'm to begin to-morrow. It wouldn't be the right thing to sell out, even if I were willing to give up the job."

"Oh, name ye'r price to give it up!" persisted Jack, evidently in an ugly mood.

"It isn't a matter of dollars and cents. I have competed for this job and secured it. I don't want to give it up."

Jack looked at his rival in silence. There was a vicious expression on his face, and Dickey expected a fight then and there, but the fellow broke the silence with:

"You go ter thunder!" and, turning, walked rapidly away, not once looking back.

Dickey touched Sam on the arm.

"Say, you just look out!" cautioned the boy. "That chap will do ye harm ef he can. He's a bad one!"

Dickey spoke seriously, but though Samuel did not laugh at the warning, he had no idea that Jack would be heard from again.

His way and Dickey's soon separated, and they parted for the night.

"I'll be on hand ter help you, early in the mornin'," the boy promised.

Sam pursued his course alone, his thoughts once more turning to Nina Arvino and her vendetta, and was quite heedless of his surroundings, when there was a stir at his side, and he was dimly conscious that somebody had leaped out of the alley he was passing; a club whistled through the air, and a heavy blow brought him to his knees.

Sam, now awake to his danger, knew that his life was sought, and that only lucky chance could save him.

"Die, die!" hissed the assailant, with intense passion, and once more the weapon was raised up for a blow.

CHAPTER V.

UP THE STEEPLE.

Sam Osborne assisted his chances by quick action, for, grasping the fellow's ankles, he threw him off his balance, and the surprised ruffian fell to the sidewalk.

Quite mechanically Sam grasped and secured the stick, but hurt and confused as he was, he lacked the strength to use it.

The assailant struggled to his feet, and, to Sam's astonishment, turned and fled down the block.

Sam rose to a sitting position, still grasping the club, but made no haste to get further up. He noted that a little child, dirty and ragged, had come out of some nook, and, small as the child was, it was probably as much that as the loss of the club which had caused the thug to flee.

Presently Sam bestirred himself, and, as his head cleared, he arose to his feet. He felt his head, and then forced a laugh.

"I am still in the swim, so why should I complain? The ugly mug has left the club, and taken nothing that belongs to me. But—was it his intention to rob me?"

He recalled Jack Collins's surly demeanor, and Dickey's warning.

"Can it be," he mused, "that I owe this to Jack? By George! I almost believe it. Jack was bound to get me out of the job if he could. Has he taken this way to do it?"

"If it was done by Jack or his friends, he must be desperately in earnest." Sam's thoughts thus took shape as he wended his steps homeward. "What does it mean? Why is he so determined that I shall not have the job on the old church? Is there a reason for it that I have not yet learned?"

There was nobody to answer, so Sam, reaching his lodgings, retired to pass a perfectly restful night.

Early in the morning he was around by the old church and busy with his work. Joseph Pratt, Dickey and two men were there to aid him, and the preliminary arrangements were soon being made.

The church was one that dated back fully three generations, and for three years had been unused—the congregation having moved further up-town and erected a new edifice. Then the parent edifice was announced for sale, and after a brief interval there appeared a Professor Thomas Jackson, and to him the church was leased. He used it for charitable purposes. He established a depot for supplying poor persons with bread and other necessities of life, and once a week he delivered instructive lectures. The last were not so very well attended, but the cheap bread was universally favored.

The professor did not claim to be a church member, but it was believed that he was a rich and benevolent man, and he certainly did much good to the poor.

Thus matters went on for nearly three years, when a new congregation was gathered in the neighborhood and steps taken to secure a building for their use. To this new society the old building was sold, and it was with the new owners that Sam was dealing. They wanted the old edifice repainted, and it was Sam who had been engaged to do the ancient steeple.

On this morning when Sam began he had several of the members for watchers, and they took great interest while the young man worked.

The Steeple-Climber's fame had been gained by doing work on steeples and chimneys hard of access, and where a staging was deemed objectionable or impossible. Now, he showed the watchers his method.

By means of a series of ropes he proceeded to encircle the steeple from its base to the extreme top—a task that occupied all of the forenoon.

When it was done the steeple was encircled with the meshes of rope and presented a singular appearance. It had been a trying work for Sam, and the leaders in the church, realizing this, insisted on his having a good long rest afterward. Then he took his pot of paint and climbed to the top again, to begin the application of the paint.

During the afternoon there was much excitement down on the street. It had become known that the labor was under way, and the dwellers in the vicinity gathered to see it done. This led to the stopping of chance pedestrians, and the street was, ere long, filled with the up-gazing crowd.

To these observers Sam looked strangely enough, so high up in the air. He was so high that he seemed small, while his fragile support awakened the keenest fears lest he should fall to his death.

Not unlike a fly did he seem, as he swung about on his aerial perch.

"My head would never stand that," declared one man.

"He is taking big chances," added another.

"Is there nothing to support him but that rope?"

"Nothing."

"That support isn't enough. He will fall sure as you live, and that'll be the end of him."

"Now, don't you bet high on that!" piped a small voice, and Dickey Pratt put in an appearance. "That feller knows his biz, you bet!"

"Who is he?"

"That is Steeple-Climber Sam, an' he's my partner in business," proudly averred the boy. "Talk about his fallin'! Well, I guess not! Say, didn't you never hear o' his climbin' chimnes ter big factories that nobody else dared ter go up? Well, that's Sam!"

"He's mighty cool about it, anyhow. Nothing but just that rope to hold him. It is wonderful."

"Looks just like a spider up there."

"Riskiest job I ever seen."

In this way the people commented, and Sam Osborne was the hero of the day. His work was unusual enough to hold the crowd below all the while, and he could not help seeing them, but was not affected thereby. He had become accustomed to that sort of thing in the past.

So he swung around the steeple, painting slowly and carefully, and moving down a little at each circuit. He was cautious, yet as cool and systematic in his lofty position as if he were painting a back-yard fence.

Of course he could not make long hours at such nerve-trying work, and, while the day was still some time from an end, he decided to cease his labors until the morrow.

Sitting on his coil of rope, he looked upward at the result of his exertions thus far.

"That's all right," he thought. "Seems just a bit streaked at one point, but the second coat will do away with that. It will brighten up the old steeple wonderfully."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sam started abruptly.

"What's that?" he muttered.

Ordinarily he would not have been at a loss to account for the sound. It had been like a human laugh—something very commonplace, usually, but it surprised and perplexed him now. He looked all around him wonderingly. The laugh had seemed to be at his own altitude, yet there was no big building near, and the steeple towered above all other things in the whole block.

"I must have been wrong," he finally decided. "Nobody could laugh near here. I guess it was the wind blowing against the steeple."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Again the laugh, and now Sam opened his eyes in genuine astonishment. Try as he would he could not explain away the sound. It was a strange laugh, husky and muffled, but laugh it was.

He looked down. The nearest place to him where a human being could stand was the semi-section of the tower which formed the base of the steeple. Joseph Pratt and his men had been there a good deal of the time, but nobody was there then that he knew.

"The laugh did not come from there, and if it did it would not have been so plainly heard. As Pratt's men are not there, who the dickens was it that laughed, and where is he?"

Sam clung to the ropes and listened for several minutes, but heard the laugh no more.

"All imagination," he murmured. "This is not a haunted place."

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERY OF THE AIR.

The Steeple-Climber moved slowly downward, clinging to the ropes and swinging more like a spider than ever. He had gone several feet when he stopped abruptly again.

"What was that?" he muttered.

It had been a dull, rattling sound, and not one that drifted up from the street. On the contrary, it had appeared to be close to him, muffled as it was. If some one had dropped something in a close recess, it would have made a sound like that.

Sam gazed up the steeple as if he expected to find the solution of the riddle there.

"It seemed to come from that quarter," he decided.

The idea appeared wild to him. Even if a sound could penetrate through the wall of the structure, which seemed impossible, he did not understand how any one could get inside the steeple. Still, the evidence was so striking that he again paused.

Carefully he listened, and soon had his reward.

"Voices inside!" he murmured, incredulously. "Now, that is too much for me to believe. There must be an echo of some sort, and it is playing me false. It can't be possible."

Yet, in the face of his decision, he still heard what seemed to be voices. Like the laugh and the other noise, they were dull, faint and muffled, and might have been far away. He tried to convince himself that they came from the street, and were in some way changed in tone, but to do this he would have to believe that something had altered all natural laws of sound. Again, it would be necessary to disregard natural laws to believe that the sounds were on a level other than with his own position.

Joseph Pratt and his men reappeared on top of the base, and Sam abandoned listening and went down to them.

"Well done, young sir!" exclaimed Pratt.

"I've only made a beginning."

"But you've done it well, and you have not broken your neck."

"Oh, I don't intend to do that, at all," responded Sam, smiling.

"The people below are looking to see you fall."

"If so, they had better take their beds along with them and camp right where they are. I am not going to fall just yet."

"I'm an old painter, and used to dizzy heights, but I wouldn't risk my life up there in mid-air, with only a little rope to keep me safe."

"All a matter of trade, Mr. Pratt. Where have you been?"

"Down to the lower part of the church."

"With your men?"

"Yes, we all went. I hope you did not need us?"

"Not in the least. It is all right."

Sam spoke absently. The statement from Pratt had increased the mystery of the air. If the common painters had not been near the top of the church, the last way of accounting for the sounds disappeared. He was left more in the dark than ever.

Presently Sam led the way, and they descended to the interior of the tower. Sam had business there. He stood close to the point where the steeple rose from the tower. He had been there before, but now had additional reasons for wanting to see the connecting point.

The steeple's base was twelve feet in diameter, and there would have been a

considerable gap inside if timbers and boards had not filled it up. It was filled, and the free space was not over twelve inches wide. Around this was a network of timbers. He had noticed this fact at the start, and commented to Pratt that the old builders had spared no pains to make the steeple strong.

He now took hold of these timbers and shook them somewhat.

"Trying to shake it down?" asked Joseph smiling.

"I am not a Samson."

"It would take one to move that mass of timbers. They builded well, those dead and gone carpenters, and I'll be sworn, this is the stoutest steeple in New York."

"Looks that way."

Again Sam answered absently. He had gained nothing by examining the point anew. It did seem that nothing larger than a cat could gain access to the spire, and this made the sounds he had heard all the more mysterious.

He might have told Joseph all about it, but he felt that he would be laughed at if he claimed to have heard laughs and voices up in mid-air, as he had done.

"I'll keep still," he decided. "While my work is going on I don't want to have people think I am crazy. It might interfere with my success. Maybe I imagined it all, anyhow. I'll hold my tongue."

He descended with the painters and was rapturously greeted by Dickey Pratt. The boy shook his hand warmly.

"We're the stuff!" exclaimed Richard. "There ain't been no sech sensation in this ward sence I was borned. People are jest on needles over it. The say you look like a spider up there, an', by jing! I guess they are about right. Why, I talked hunky about your skill, but I really expected you ter come tumblin' down like ripe fruit an' git smashed finer than beefsteak, by gum!"

"This isn't the week for the hog-killing, Dickey," suggested the Steeple-Climber, calmly.

He worked his way through the crowd and went to his boarding place. He had a bath and then supper, after which he sat down to rest—and to think.

His mind dwelt on the mystery of the air.

"Strangest thing I ever heard!" he thought. "I'm sure I'm not off my base, an' it don't look likely to me there would be any jugglery of sound. I am forced to believe there is somebody in the steeple."

Pondering on the case, a new idea came to him at length.

"I have a good mind to go there and look into it," he muttered.

He had a key to the old church and could enter whenever he wished, and if he went alone, at a late hour, he would have the advantage of a deserted street and utter quiet in the venerable house of worship.

The new idea was adopted; so that night at twelve o'clock, supplied with a small lantern, he took his way toward the church.

All was dark and still there, and the street in that immediate locality was deserted; sleep reigned over all.

Unlocking the door, he entered, after which he lighted his lantern and looked around.

The interior was church-like in one respect only, and that was its shape. Professor Jackson's bread and lecture enterprises had given color to the place, and it seemed more akin to a huge eating-room than a place of worship.

He lingered but briefly, and then ascended to the upper part.

His first stop was in the base of the tower, and there he listened to see if any-

thing was to be heard. No sound came to him, and the entrance to the spire was blocked up as usual.

The events of the afternoon had taken place when he was up on the steeple, and there he prepared to go again on his midnight mission. Leaving his lantern in a secure spot, he began the mount.

When he attained the foot of the spire he paused again for a moment, and then kept on. There was light enough to aid him, and he was soon well up the slender turret. He went, as in the daytime, clinging to the ropes and swinging in his "spider" fashion, with the sky much nearer to him than usual, and the sidewalk far below.

There he paused to make the real beginning of his task.

It was the first time he had ever been in such a place by night, and even his boldness did not prevent a feeling of brief uneasiness. The sky looked gloomy and unfriendly, and his support appeared to be frailer than ever. It was a dizzy height, and he shuddered to think what a fall would bring him. Far below a patrolman passed on his beat. He did not look up, and Sam instinctively murmured:

"I am alone in mid-air, and with my ordinary dangers trebled. If I lose my hold on the ropes it means death. I should be a shapeless mass if I took that tumble. Ugh! it isn't a nice spot to be in at this night hour."

Abandoning these thoughts he proceeded to listen. The wind played around the steeple with a gentle whisper, and there was the faintest rumble from the more frequented streets close at hand.

"Nothing from the inside of the steeple, though," he thought, after a vain wait. "Why should there be? I am crazy to believe in it—but I heard it myself; there is something in there. Hark! wasn't that a sound?"

The rope shook. He started and used his eyes instead of his ears. He was positive that there was unnatural motion to the rope.

"What if somebody has cut it?" he thought, alarmed. "Am I to fall?"

CHAPTER VII.

A THRILLING ENCOUNTER.

Cool as Sam was, he was startled by the thought. If the rope had been meddled with all of his skill would avail him nothing and if it gave way he would go shooting down to his death.

He remained inactive, and then the rope moved again suspiciously. It was as if weight other than his own was upon it. Instinctively he fixed his gaze on the point where the motion was greatest, and then he had another surprise.

A man moved around the side of the steeple. Sam was no longer alone in his aerial quarters; he had company on the steeple. Amazed, he stared at the second person, seeking to learn his identity in the dim light. To meet anybody there was an astonishing event, but he thought it might possibly be one of the painters.

A little further the unknown advanced and only a couple of feet separated him from Sam. He stopped short and the two looked at each other.

The Steeple-Climber's vision was growing keener, and recognition came at last. It dumfounded him. The other man was Jack Collins, the rival climber.

A pause; then Jack spoke.

"Well, so you're here," he exclaimed.

"What are you here for, Jack Collins?" retorted Sam, sharply.

Jack broke into an unmusical laugh.

"Didn't expect ter meet me here, did ye?"

"No. Why are you here? Who let you come up?"

"I came up of my own accord. When I want ter go anywhere I do not ask anybody's leave. As to the why, I'm here ter see ye alone. I wanted a good spot fer the interview, an' I don't know of any more appropriate. Do you? This is the place we both wanted ter git at, an' the one you got an' I lost. Here we be up on the old church steeple, some hundred an' fifty feet from the ground. Nice place ter be in, ain't it?"

"There is room for one."

"Just my notion—room fer one! He's all right up here, ef he don't fall. Ef he does, it would go hard with him. Look down. See the sidewalk, so far below that it looks dim an' hazy. A fall from here would be sure death."

"You ought not to have risked it."

"I did so because I had a reason. Do you know what it is?"

Jack's manner had been peculiar from the first, and though he made no hostile movement, the impression was strong in Sam's mind that his rival meant mischief. It was suggested in every tone and motion. Just so might a tiger gloat over an expected victim, if he had the power of gloating.

Was there to be trouble on the dizzy height? Sam thought so, but he remained as cool as possible.

"What is your reason?" he inquired, quietly.

Jack Collins thrust his head forward so that his face was within a few inches of the man he hated.

"I'm here to square the account!"

"What account?"

"Between you an' me. You got my job away from me—"

"I did nothing of the sort. I was asked to take the contract, and I took it. I never had heard of you then."

"Same thing; you got it. An' when I asked you ter give it up ter me you refused—"

"Why should I give it up?"

"I wanted it."

"That's very logical."

"I kin show you something that is logical. Mister Man, I hate you, an' I'm up here ter square the account."

"How will you do it?"

"I'm goin' ter throw you off this steeple!" hissed Jack.

Even Sam was rendered speechless by this vehement announcement. It would be the act of a demon, but Jack seemed equal to it.

"You ain't goin' ter do this steeple-work," pursued the rival climber. "I've sworn that, an' I'll keep my word. I may hang fer it, but, down you go! I'll throw you off! What then? Why, you'll go shootin' down, down, down! And what then? When you strike what will it be? Look down! That's a clear fall of a hundred an' fifty feet. Why, when they pick you up they can't tell whether you're a man or a load of offal from a butcher's shop."

Sam made an effort to rally.

"If you are really in earnest, I'll warn you go slow. I am your equal in strength and skill, and I'm more at home up in such a place. I shall take no risks, and I warn you not to molest me. If you do it will go hard with you."

"It will, eh? See here!"

Jack thrust his hand into his coat. It came out claspings a knife, the light from the moon showing this plainly.

"That's what will beat you out!" he added. "I ain't goin' ter take no chances myself. I'll jest slash you with this!"

He waved the weapon close to Sam's face, and the latter then became fully aware of the degree of his danger.

"If I take you at your word," answered Sam, with surprising steadiness, "I want

to remind you of one thing. Even if you were to succeed in such a purpose, and send me down, what would become of you?"

"Maybe I'll be on the coroner's staff when he sets ont'er you."

"You would go down, too."

"Not much! I'm goin' ter look out fer myself, an' you kin bet I don't take that tumble. But you will—you'll go down, down, down! Yes, you'll go to death, and right away, too. Look out! I'm comin' for you!"

"Stop!"

Jack had moved a little forward, but Sam's commanding tone made him pause again.

"Turn and go down that rope to the tower!" added Sam.

"Not much! I'm here ter kill you, an' I'm goin' ter do it. Yes, an' I'll do it now. Here goes!"

Sam had been considering his chances, but saw no way to escape that encounter. Jack was bent on his diabolical purpose, and he must be met. The meeting seemed to promise nothing but death. Even if the odds had been in Sam's favor, and he, not Jack, had been armed, he could not have looked upon the matter hopefully. Their support was of the frailest kind, and position at the most favorable times was to be kept only by great caution and cool nerve.

How could he hope to keep position now?

Once he looked down, but the view made his flesh creep. Never before had he seemed to be up so high—never had such awful distances appeared to intervene between himself and solid land! He dared not look again. He was appalled by the sight.

"Jack," he once more spoke seriously, "I ask you to go down the ropes. If we have trouble it means death to us both. Go down!"

"Bah! Not until you've gone in another way. I've waited long enough, and now I'll end this all. Here goes!"

Jack threw back his hand.

For an instant Sam's head swam, his brave heart wavered; but he once more nerved himself for action.

He had hesitated to begin the struggle himself, for he felt that it might result in homicide, but he could not remain inactive and let a deadly foe kill him at leisure. One sweep of the knife would end his career, and then—the terrible fall and certain death!

He resolved not to let Jack begin, and when the knife went up he acted upon his idea.

Risking something, he suddenly leaned forward and struck out toward the arm that supported the knife. Jack realized his purpose too late; the blow went true, and his fist caught Jack near the elbow. Instantly the knife went flying away, and, after a brief upward journey, was shooting downward with many a turn to the ground.

It fell on the sidewalk with a sharp clang.

The noise broke the lull that had come above. Jack had been dumfounded by his misfortune, but he rallied as he heard the knife strike.

"You've done it!" he hissed angrily.

"We are on equal terms now," coolly replied Sam.

"That won't save you. I'll throw you off anyway."

"My own strength will save me. If you value your own life, go down while you can. I'll not touch you."

"Curse you!" retorted the rough, "you needn't be flush with ye'r promises. I'll kill ye yet. The fight is still on. I'm comin'!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH LIFE IN PERIL.

Jack Collins was thoroughly aroused, and he lost no time in moving. Sam sounded another warning, but it was unheeded. Jack shoved along the frail support until close to his rival; then he reached out one hand. His purpose was to seize Sam by the collar, but the latter frustrated the move by imitating the example, and the two grasped each other by the arm, in the meanwhile clinging with the other hand to the ropes.

"Down you go!" hissed Jack.

He made an effort to push Sam off, and the struggle began. It was of necessity to be a one-handed fight, for they could not release their hold upon the support for an instant, but it was not the less fierce and hostile.

Jack tugged away lustily, and his adversary, seeing there was no help for it, was not slow to follow in his steps.

They writhed and struggled savagely, and an observer would have said it must end in death to both of them. People had wondered how a man could keep his position without anything to work against him—how, then, were they to do it with the fight in progress?

Far below the sidewalk seemed to yawn for them, its stone surface presenting a landing place to which neither could fall without loss of life.

Up at that dizzy height they writhed and contested for the mastery, animal-like and full of desperation.

Sam tried to keep his mind chiefly on the necessity of maintaining his grasp on the rope. If he once lost that hold it meant death. Tenaciously he clung, and all the while he resisted Jack's efforts to cast him down.

For several minutes there was no change in the situation. Then the would-be murderer relaxed his efforts briefly.

"You hang well," he growled.

"You see the folly of this," replied Sam.

"Neither of us can do anything more than to cling to the supports. Let it go at that. If we have a grudge we can settle it on earth far better than up here."

"No! This is the place."

"Don't you see that neither can succeed?"

"No, I don't! I can succeed. Here's to prove it!"

Again he attacked savagely, and the fight became worse than before. They swayed about dangerously, and the ropes strained and gave under the responsibility put upon them. The rivals were now literally clasped in each other's arms, and at times they hung partially over the awful chasm that yawned below. Terrible was the situation.

"I have you now!" panted Jack. "I'll do you up."

"Once more," replied Sam, with energy, "I warn you to let up. I am in better condition than you. You weaken. I am as strong as ever. Save your life! Let go!"

"Never! I'll finish you off! I'll throw you to the ground!"

Repeated failure and the partial realization of the fact that he was growing weak maddened Jack. He almost threw himself upon his rival, and his own impetus brought catastrophe. He lost his grasp on the ropes and swung into space.

He dangled over the terrible chasm with only the mutual grasp to keep him from shooting down to death.

For a moment there was an ominous pause; then the voice of the would-be assassin rose in terror.

"Help!" he cried. "Save me! save me!"

Sam held to the rope supporting the double weight, and uncertain what to

do. It was to his credit that, villain that Jack was, he did not think of releasing his hold and letting the fellow go shooting down to death, but he did not see how he was to prevent it.

Never before had he been placed in such a position, and he was dumfounded by the peril of the hour.

Jack writhed, gasped and moaned, revealing all of the ways of a pitiable coward in his danger.

"Help! help!" he wailed.

Sam rose to the magnitude of the emergency. If anything was done, it must be quickly. Jack's grasp was tenacious, but all the weight was on Sam's arm. That single arm could not long support them both, and, unless the rough could be pulled back to the ropes, both men would go down to death.

"Brace up!" Sam cried, bravely. "Don't hang there lifelessly. Reach out and get a hold on the rope. There must be a loose noose near you. Set your feet in it, and don't hang there helpless. Your left hand and your feet are free. Find a place for them—get a place at once."

"Help, help!" moaned Jack, in the same weak voice.

Perspiration broke out on Sam's face. He realized that Jack had lost his nerve wholly. He was as helpless as a child, and the whole burden was thrown upon the single man above.

It flashed upon Sam that he must do it all, and do it before the strength left his arms. He acted on the impulse without delay.

With a sudden stiffening of his muscles he lifted lustily. Jack must be pulled back to his level. He raised—he made his arm a living derrick—he swung Jack higher, and, with a tremendous effort, pulled him up to the former level.

"Get your feet into the noose!" commanded the rescuer.

It was more luck than anything else, but Jack's feet did find the noose, and the terrible strain was in part taken off from the single man. Jack, however, remained limp and trembling.

"Get your hand onto the rope!" ordered Sam.

"I can't, I can't! Oh, save me, save me!"

It was a veritable panic, and Sam knew he had a clear case of flunk on his hands.

"You fool!" he almost shouted, "do you want to go down to death?"

"No! oh, no!" gasped Jack. Save me!"

"Then obey me. Get hold of the rope!"

The command was obeyed, but Jack's arms were weak, and Sam saw that if he relaxed his own hold upon him the rough would go down at once. Sam looked around hurriedly. Far below, the hard sidewalk glimmered in the gaslight. The place was deserted by all, but it mattered not. Nobody could have been of use; it was left to them to struggle on alone.

The elevation looked more dizzy and terrible than ever before and the danger was still appalling. He turned his gaze upon the broken-spirited rough and was momentarily tempted. Why should he risk his own life for such a dastard?

"We have no human witness," thought the Steeple-Climber. "The truth would never be known except by my own statement, and I might be blamed and accused. I'll save the scoundrel if I can. Jack!"

"Save me, save me!" moaned the rough.

"We must go down to the tower. Can you climb?"

"I am blind; I can't see."

"Fool! You must! You'll have to see and to climb. You must go down to the tower! Go!"

"I can't, I can't! I am blind."

As limp as ever Jack remained and Sam again rallied all his strength to the terrible ordeal.

"Can you hold to me?"

"Yes."

"Do your best. We must go, and do it at once. I've got to keep my hand on the ropes, and you'll have to do most of the clinging that is to save you, but it may be you can succeed. Lower your feet. Feel for the next noose. Down, down!"

"I can't!" wailed Jack.

Sam was frightened and enraged by the supineness of the fellow, and it dawned upon him that only one thing would stir him into life. He tried it. He rained a storm of angry, keen words upon Jack, and the result was good. The rough aroused a little, and, when the plan was again presented to him, he met it with a willing spirit, if not with energy.

One great drawback remained—he was as weak as a child, physically.

Under such unfavorable conditions the descent was begun. It was the most critical stage of affairs yet seen, for Sam had to loosen his grasp with each move made, and his opportunities for clinging with foot and with cramped and badly-extended arm were so miserable that two lives were constantly in danger.

Dizzily the twain swung from the great height, and every moment they were in vital peril. Once let Sam's hold relax, or let his brave spirit fail, and they would go to a like death.

He did not weaken, and they passed on slowly, clinging and laboring constantly, and thus the tower was neared.

It did, indeed, seem that Jack was blind with terror, but it would not do for Sam to weaken. He did not weaken, and by his heroic effort the battle was won.

They reached the tower.

Both dropped to the floor and lay there panting. The one was still a wretched coward; the other was physically wearied out.

It was some minutes later when Sam stirred again. He rose to his feet and fixed a hostile gaze upon his rival.

"Go down!" he commanded, pointing down the tower steps.

Jack rose almost dog-like. The danger was over, but he was far from being himself yet. The awful terror had left its mark on him. He had a degree of strength, now, though, and he docilely proceeded to go as directed.

They went on toward the lower part of the church.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH.

Sam had secured his lantern, and with its light fully on they had means of guiding their steps. In due time they were on the lower floor. There the Steeple-Climber stopped short.

"Halt!" he ordered.

Jack Collins turned with some meekness.

"Are you satisfied?" added Sam.

"Hully gee! but didn't we hev' a close call?" exclaimed Jack, bracing up considerably.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Why, we've got off clear, ain't we?"

"You tried to take my life," persisted Sam. "Are you satisfied?"

Jack looked down at the floor, but the questioner had his answer all the same. He saw the evil gleam shoot into his rival's eyes. It told all very clearly.

"I wuz took with a vertigo," muttered the rough. "I never wuz weak when up high before, but I took sick. It made me sorter unfit fer such a high place."

"If it had not been for me you would

be a dead man now. You came up there to kill me. What did I do to you?"

"Well we—we fit."

"I saved you from falling to the street."

"Eh? You did?"

"Didn't I?"

"Why, we sorter helped each other—"

"That will do. I see you are not willing to be frank. Are you still eager to take my life?"

Jack's eyes glittered anew.

"Why, of course, we are still rivals. We're in the same biz, an' our interests will clash—"

"You tried to throw me off of the steeple. When your pluck gave out I saved your life. Are you still desirous of killing me?"

"You saved my life? Well, I like that! You've got the gall, you have! Why, it was a toss-up which did the most—"

"Enough! I won't listen to more of this talk. Jack, how did you get into the church?"

"I—I fell asleep here an' was locked up by mistake before supper."

"I believe you lie!"

"Oh! come, now, don't get sassy, or I'll hev' ter ask ye ter put up yer dukes—"

"Loathsome wretch! You lack the first principles of manhood. Look you, Jifck, we have had a common adventure to-night. It was all brought on by your attempt to kill me. Jack, don't try that again. The next time I shall not save you."

"Who asked you to?" snapped the rough.

"You are fully warned. Next time, look well to your safety. I'm not the man to let you kill me at will, nor to help him who would kill me. Look out next time!"

There was that in the warning that chilled Jack's assurance a trifle, and when Sam threw open the door of the church and motioned him to go out on the street, he went without delay.

Sam relocked the door, and then pointed down the street.

"It is time for you to go," he added.

"Look here," growled Jack, "who said you could order me around?"

"Common humanity has led me to save your life, to-night, even in the face of your attempt to kill me. Now it's all over, the drama is played out. You can't linger around this church. If you try it I will call a policeman. I ought to do this, anyhow, for you tried to murder me, but I am inclined to drop it if you behave yourself. If you refuse, I'll have you arrested. Do you go?"

Jack eyed his rival sullenly, but he was not prepared to bring certain trouble upon himself. Suddenly he muttered some indistinct words and then turned and stalked off down the block.

Sam watched him out of sight.

"I suppose I am a fool to let him slip, but I don't want a row over this steeple contract. Maybe Jack will cool off, now I have bested him in the struggle. Gratitude he has none, but he ought to know by this time he can't beat me in equal fight. I wonder why he was up steepleward to-night—"

Sam stopped short. In the confusion of more vital matters he had forgotten all about the mysterious noises of the steeple, and even now he was not inclined to renew his labors up aloft, but there was something suggestive about the way in which Jack Collins had appeared on the scene.

"Can it be," wondered the Steeple-Climber, "that Jack had anything to do with the strange noises? If not, how did he get into the church? This must be looked to more closely. I'm going to know what those noises meant, and who

made them. Voices and a laugh from the steeple! I am not superstitious, and the only practical way of explaining things is to believe that the steeple is inhabited. I am going to find out more about it, and that, too, right soon."

Sam had been walking away slowly while thinking, but after going a few blocks the fascination of the mystery of the steeple came over him again. He did not care to risk his over-taxed strength by again climbing up, but it occurred to him that perhaps something might be seen by cautious reconnoitering of the vicinity.

He walked back and took up a position in the darkest doorway he could find within easy sight of the place.

As before, the church was dark and silent, and the steeple loomed above it like an ebon finger pointing to the sky.

"And it was up there that I had my fight for life," mused the young man. "I begin to see, now, that the common people have some reason for saying that my calling is a dangerous one. It's a dizzy height, and a tumble would be a terrible death."

His gaze roved up and down the slender spire, and it was this that suddenly brought something else into view. He stirred out of his subdued mood.

"What?" he exclaimed.

It had been a ray of light up at the point where the steeple connected with the tower—unless his eyes deceived him. It had shot out like an arrow and then faded away.

"That's queer!" he muttered. "I haven't anything the matter with my eyes, and I don't often conjure up forms that don't exist. A flash of light from near the top of the tower. Very strange. Can somebody be up there now? Or was it a ray from some other section? Nonsense! If it was there at all it had its origin right there."

Watching, he soon saw more. Instead of a momentary flash he saw a broader ray of light resting on the base of the steeple, as if a lamp was burning at the summit of the tower.

"Aha!" he spoke aloud, "I guess the theory that the spire is inhabited is not so very wild, after all. Somebody must be up there—unless I admit the theory of supernatural lights, and I am not built in that way. The light—Ah! it disappears!"

It was gone, and though Sam watched further he saw nothing suspicious from the vicinity. Dark and full of grandeur the steeple loomed above the old church.

Sam was patient and he kept his place. Half an hour passed, and then new sounds led to the shifting of his gaze. The movement brought new discoveries.

The church door was open.

A man appeared at that point.

Coming from the interior, he paused for an instant on the threshold, and then quietly closed the door. Sam heard the clicking of a key, and then the latter was withdrawn. The place had been locked up, and the midnight mover walked away from it. His course was toward Sam, and the latter stood still and waited.

Presently the man was close, so close that he was seen to be no stranger. In his long-bearded face and long-coated figure Sam recognized Professor Thomas Jackson, the man who had sold cheap bread in the church to the poor.

The Steeple-Climber knit his brows. Quickly the recollection came to him that he had heard it said that Jackson, after vainly remonstrating against being obliged to surrender his tenancy of the premises, had yielded gracefully to the inevitable, abandoned the place for good, and given up his key.

How happened it, then, that he now had a key, and what was he doing inside after all his rights had lapsed?

The professor went past the doorway which concealed Sam, and continued down the block. Acting on a sudden impulse, the Steeple-Climber fell in behind him and pursued him quietly.

Two blocks Mr. Jackson went; then he was abruptly accosted by another man. Sam whistled softly.

"Jack Collins! Now, what does that mean? They greet each other like old acquaintances. They speak together with friendly earnestness—yes, they seem to be very much in earnest! Ginger! I don't understand this. Jack is a typical tough, and the professor is a very good man who sells cheap bread. At least, they say he's very good. What can he and Jack have in common?"

Something they did have out of the common, for they talked long and seriously, Jack doing most of the speaking. The rough's manner was excited and animated, and some sort of story he fairly poured forth.

When he was done, careful thought on Jackson's part seemed to follow, and their conference was continued for half an hour. At last they separated, and each went his way. They left Sam greatly perplexed.

What was the meaning of all this mystery?

CHAPTER X.

HUNTING THE PADRONE.

At an earlier hour of the evening two boys stood on a street corner several blocks from the church. One of them was Dickey Pratt, and the other was a lad who bore the name of Timothy O'Meara. The latter, like Dickey, was the son of parents who were reckoned well-to-do in their humble ward, and both were respectably dressed.

Dickey was in an eager mood.

"Now, Timmy," he was saying, "jest you keep this mum, whatever happens."

"Did yez ever know me ter peach?" asked Timothy.

"Never!"

"I ain't that sort. My tongue wasn't give ter me fer a racehorse, an' I believe in keepin' strings onter it when it could do any harm. That's my motto."

"Ditto, ditto, my frien'!" approvingly exclaimed Richard. "Now, ef you're all ready, let us git a hustle on."

"I'm ready."

"You're sure you kin git inter Lucio Zacharelli's rooms?"

"Yes."

"Then let us go an' take a squint at his lair an' see what he keeps in them rooms. Ef he's got a vendetta ter wage in this glorious New York o' ours, we must git in onter his curves right quick."

"Can't we disguise ourselves?" inquired Timmy, thoughtfully.

"What fer?"

"I've heard that reg'lar detectives do that thing."

"What disguise would ye use?"

"I've got some clothes at home, an' I might make up like a Turkish nobleman, an' you be my slave."

Timothy was perfectly serious, but a smile stole over Dickey's face at the idea.

"My frien', it takes more than clothes ter make a Turkish nobleman. You lack a foot of height fer that job. You've got ter grow some first, Timmy."

"Then let me be an African dwarf—they have slaves, don't they?"

"You're bound ter make me ye'r slave, ain't ye, Timmy?"

"Well," seriously answered the second boy, "it's my house an' I thought it best I should be the boss. See?"

"Your notion is capital, my frien', an' some day when we hev' plenty o' time off we kin work it. Yes, I'll be ye'r slave, jest ter please you, but on this trip I reckon we had better omit all disguises an' them things. Le's sail under our own colors. Ready, Timmy?"

"Yes."

"Lead on!"

And they went. Their expedition was one of which mature minds would not have approved. Dickey had been a good deal interested in the talk that Nina Arvino made about Lucio Zacharelli and his vendetta. The thing had a fascination for the boy's mind, and the more he dwelt on it the more he wanted to investigate it. From his friend Timothy he learned that Zacharelli dwelt in the same house with the O'Mearas, and that fired his ambition anew.

The final result was the present expedition.

Zacharelli, the padrone, lived in a five-storied building, each floor of which was occupied by a different family. His was the fourth, and Timmy O'Meara's parents had the third. Lucio was not much at home, Timmy had said, but, when he was there, he had many callers from among the ranks of his countrymen, who considered him decidedly useful to them in the way of getting employment. Really, it was believed that Lucio was getting the lion's share of good out of it.

The padrone's sole companion in his suite of rooms was a withered old woman of the name of Brigada.

Now, the two boys ascended to the floor of the O'Mearas, and then, avoiding the eyes of Timmy's parents, they mounted to the next floor.

It was not yet the hour when doors were naturally to be found locked, but they did not intend to use doors. The whole house was old and queer of construction, and Timmy was aware of all its peculiarities. He intended to make use of them now.

First he entered a little room that led off of the hall. In the further side of this was an opening in the wall, used for purposes of light, but minus window fittings. Timmy stepped into a chair and looked through this opening.

Quickly he turned and made a motion to Dickey; then he turned once more, pulled himself up and disappeared through the hole in the wall.

"Ditto, ditto!" murmured Richard, and he straightway followed in his friend's steps.

There was a lighted room beyond, but it was untenanted.

The boys stood in this room, fairly within the padrone's quarters.

"Be careful!" cautioned Timmy. "Let me see if the old woman is in the next room."

He opened the door a little, and then motioned to Dickey. The latter also looked, and he saw a very swarthy and none-too-clean old woman peacefully slumbering in a chair. She was oblivious of everything about her, and Timmy re-closed the door and nodded to his companion.

"All clear," he announced.

"Be you, sure the padrone ain't in?" asked Dickey.

"Ef he was he would be in this room. It's his quarters."

"Well, le's go on an' see what we kin find."

Dickey was not outspoken, but he was well aware that Nina Arvino had persisted in her claim that her lost diamonds had been taken by Zacharelli, and Dickey could not help thinking what a glorious thing it would be if he could recover the jewels.

"That," began Timmy, "is the room where Lucio sleeps—"

"Just where I want ter go. Come on!"

Dickey had grown reckless, and he pushed into the room without delay. Once past the threshold he paused, bewildered by the things he saw. Ordinarily the padrone wore the same sort of garments as the people of his adopted land, but, on certain occasions, he proved that he kept a supply of the clothes peculiar to his native land.

The room was like a scene from Italy. In all of its fittings it was Italian, and Italian garments hung on the wall with accompaniments of various smaller things common to the sunny land.

"By jing! this is great!" muttered Dickey, dazzled by the bright colors.

"Lucio is a great dresser an' swell," replied Timmy.

"So he must be. I'd like ter set eyes on him when he's got himself up in these duds. Rather wish I had some o' the same sort too. Guess I'll blossom out in them sort."

"Say, Dick," whispered Timmy, in a mysterious voice, "wouldn't it be jest great ter be an Italian brave an' go around with stiletos like them in ye'r belt?"

"Hush, hush!" cautioned Dickey. "Don't talk that a-way here; you make my flesh sorter creep. You're too romantic, Tim, an' I don't like them knives."

Dickey was sincere. There were several stiletos hung on the wall, all neatly crossed, and with blades as bright and keen as razors. Very well they looked, or would have done so under some conditions. Now, Dickey saw no beauty in them, and he began to realize that it was no small matter to hunt the padrone in his lair.

"Jest keep ye'r mind on biz," he added. "I want ter look this room over a bit."

The speaker's gaze wandered. He wondered where Lucio would naturally put a stolen necklace of diamonds, if he had possession of such a thing.

There was a bureau, and to this he went.

"Say," whispered Timmy, "you turn burglar an' let me be a detective an' arrest you, an' there will be a pile o' talk about us—"

"Hush up! I'm here on biz. I'm goin' ter search this bureau—"

"Oh, Dickey!" gasped Timothy, suddenly.

"What is it?" and Dickey caught the note of alarm.

"There comes the padrone inter the front room!"

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING SCENE.

Dickey quitted the bureau with long steps and a face that seemed about as long. He had detected the inflection of his ally, and he knew that Timmy was frightened. So was he. It was one thing to be in Lucio Zacharelli's rooms when Lucio was out, and quite another to be there when Lucio was present.

There was a sound of steps in the front room and a murmur of voices, and Dickey ran and took position by Timothy's side.

Several Italians had come from the hall into the main room. With one exception they were poorly dressed, and all were typical natives of the sunny land. Swarthy, black-haired and unshaven, they did not present an appearance that impressed the boys favorably.

The exception above noted was a man of some thirty-five years. He was better dressed than his companions, and more intelligent looking, and Dickey was not surprised when Timothy pointed him out and whispered:

"That's Lucio Zacharelli."

"Tim, what's ter become of us?" returned Dickey.

"I'm afraid we're in a bad fix."

"Ain't there any way out but that?"

"No."

"We can't get by them."

"That's so."

"By jing! they will find us, an' do us up."

"I wish we hadn't come in."

"Well, we're here, an' we must eat our supper now. We brought it all on ourselves. Brace up! We ain't goners yet!"

Dickey's courage was coming to the front, and he really began to feel that they were not so badly off, after all. He had his fill at seeing Zacharelli, and possibly they would not be found. Just as he was thinking this, however, Lucio started toward the bedroom.

"Ginger!" gasped Timothy, in dismay.

"Hold the door. No! Hide!"

Dickey looked around excitedly. The room was supplied with an old-fashioned bed, with high posts and high frame, and the boy dodged under it with all possible haste. Tim followed, and they were screened from view for the time.

The padrone came in, but he did not linger long. He wanted some trivial article. He secured it, and then returned to the outer room.

Dickey promptly crawled out from under the bed and went near the connecting door. Lucio had left it as it was before, and he had no trouble in seeing the room beyond. The padrone had taken a seat, and his companions were looking at him as at a leader. He did not long keep them in waiting.

"Comrades," he spoke, "we are here tonight on business. We will proceed to it now. I need not ask if you all remember your oath."

"We remember," replied a swarthy fellow, with a red handkerchief around his neck.

"You are sworn to do my bidding."

"Yes."

"I have need of some of you now."

"We serve you, chief."

"The work is one requiring secrecy, nerve, skill and devotion. It has come to my ears that some of our fellow-Italians in New York do not approve of me and my methods. They claim to be high class, and to have a strong love for the laws of this land, and all that sort of nonsense. It seems that when they were in Italy they did not believe in the system of vendetta, and they believe in it even less here. They know, or suspect, that I am at the head of this bold band, who do secret work, and I verily believe they would be glad to betray us all to the police of New York, just to preserve what they call the honor of Italy. They feel above us, men."

"Down with them!" cried he of the red handkerchief.

"Are you all of that mind?"

"Yes, yes!" was the cry. "Kill them!"

"Not so fast," replied Zacharelli. "We can't wipe out all of the so-called high-class Italian population of New York. What I want is that you shall do your secret work more secretly than ever, to avoid the censure of the fault-finders."

"We will do our best."

"Good! Now, there is secret work to do, and about three men are needed. We will draw lots, as usual."

Lucio went to the mantel and took down several round pieces of white substance which were not unlike enlarged poker chips. These he carefully laid upon the table, after which he shuffled them about well. This done, he stepped back and briefly directed:

"Draw!"

Dickey Pratt was listening and watching with rapt attention. So was Timmy

O'Meara, but the latter's interest was romantic rather than practical.

"Oh!" he whispered, "isn't this beautiful? Now, if they would only cross their knives and swear an awful oath over the blades this would be just prime!"

Dickey did not heed this remark, but his gaze remained glued to the scene in the next room.

The swarthy followers of the padrone's fortunes took the matter with the utmost nonchalance. They advanced to the table, and the first to arrive picked up a disk, and, turning it over, exposed the under side. It was exactly like its mate, and he shrugged his shoulders and moved back.

The second man drew, but when he turned the object over it was to be seen that the reverse side was black.

Others followed until all had drawn. Of the number three had half-black drawings, while the others were white in all parts.

They seemed to understand just what this meant, for all of the latter class put on their hats, said a few words to Lucio Zacharelli, and then left the room. Only the three who had the black drawings remained with the padrone.

He motioned them to be seated.

"Now to business," he continued, briskly. "Again, swear to be silent and faithful."

"We swear," they replied, in concert.

"The work before you is to kidnap a girl."

"Ah!" murmured Dickey, with a start.

"Name her!" tersely requested one of the bravos.

"The matter is very important to me," asserted Lucio. "I have a twofold object in it all. First, there is a vendetta to attend to, for her family and mine are old foes, and she is her only family representative in this country."

"The vendetta is sacred," murmured one of the men, solemnly.

"Tis the hate of several generations."

"We will do your bidding."

"Through fire and flame, through the peril of knife, revolver and law?" deeply asked the padrone.

"Ay, all of that."

"We are in New York."

"We know it all."

"Here they have a fanatical regard for law."

"We have none."

"Excellent! You are the same brave men, and I greet you as good comrades. Your hand, Antonio, and yours, Vencio, and yours, Paulus. Now to business. This girl must be removed. Late news assures me that I am getting into peril, and the freedom of the girl is a menace to me. She must be removed silently and surely, and confined in some secure place of imprisonment."

"We'll do the work, chief."

"Her name is Nina Arvino."

"Ah!" again murmured Dickey Pratt.

"I have the prison all ready," pursued Lucio. "You have only to seize her. Here, Vencio, take this paper. It will tell you where the prison is located. As to how you get the girl, that is for you to decide. You must watch your chance. Maybe you will have to enter the house where she lives. Chance will decide the means of success."

Lucio leaned back with an air that told that the important part of the interview was over, and Dickey turned away from the door. He took Timothy by the arm and led him to a safe place.

"I say," he remarked, "what do you think of this?"

"Isn't it jolly?" replied Tim.

"Jolly! Well, maybe you call it that; but say, old man, how be we goin' ter git out?"

"We might charge them."

"An' git ketched? Not any in mine, thank ye. Timmy, we're in a fix. We hev' been too rash, I do believe. Here we be in Lucio's lair, an' we're in difficulty. What be we to do?"

Timothy began to think more seriously. He was romantic, but, now that his mind got clearly in motion, he decided that romance did not make them safe. He thought of the blissful peace of the city streets, and wished he was outside to enjoy that familiar region. His face lengthened perceptibly.

"Hark!" added Dickey, "they're on the move. What is it? Ah, they are going out. Good! No! Lucio remains."

"He says good-night ter the rest."

"Yes."

"Now he turns back this way."

"Tim, we're in fer it. He will ketch us, sure as fate. By jing! we're done up! He is comin' in here!"

CHAPTER XII.

IN GREAT DANGER.

The statement was correct. They could not see the padrone, but he had extinguished the light in the next room, and his steps told of his advance toward his sleeping room.

"What shall we do?" gasped Timothy.

"Under the bed!"

With this Dickey turned and made a headlong dive, and his ally was not far behind him. Hurriedly they scrambled under the bed, and rolled over as near to the wall as they could get.

Lucio Zacharelli walked in slowly.

Dickey had been under the fear that their rapid change might have been heard by the Italian, but he gave no sign of anything of the sort. His manner was calm and quiet, and he first tossed away his coat, and then lighted a cigar and sat down to smoke. The odor of the weed filled the room, and Lucio seemed to find much pleasure in it. The boys, peering furtively out, saw him with a serious expression and knitted brows. Something was weighing heavily on his mind.

Timothy began to rally, and he wished that the padrone would indulge in mutterings like a stage villain, but Lucio kept silent.

It was not a romantic view that Dickey took of the case. What he wanted to know was how he was to get out, and he did not see the way clear. Zacharelli had them prisoners, and it was too much to hope that he would go out and leave a clear field.

Half an hour passed. By that time the padrone's cigar was exhausted, and he tossed the remnant away.

Rising, he began to prepare for bed.

This was not a long task, and in due time he had put out the light and taken to the resting place. The two boys remained in position, and were now directly under him.

They had a strong degree of courage, but they did not like the situation. They were still prisoners, and even Timothy forgot to be romantic. As for Dickey, he could not see how they were to get out. Only a mattress and a sheet separated him from the padrone, and he believed that his life would pay the forfeit if Lucio found him.

Once discovered, Lucio would realize that they had heard all of his interview with his men, and Dickey suspected that the bravo chief would not let human life stand in the way of his safety.

"Ef he finds us he will kill us!" thought the boy, lugubriously.

The prisoners did nothing to precipitate the calamity. They were sufficiently scared to do their level best to be still.

Zacharelli lay quiet, too, and the room gave forth no sound. The minutes wore on and nothing told how the padrone was

progressing with his wooing of slumber. The darkness seemed deeper than ever, and there were heavy hearts under the bed.

Then—deep breathing sounded from above!

Dickey brightened up quickly.

Could it be that Lucio was succumbing to sleep?

Deeper grew the breathing, and lighter grew the boy's heart, but he was patient. Once Timothy touched him meaningfully, but he conveyed a warning, and they waited.

Another half hour passed; then Dickey put his mouth close to his companion's ear. Very softly, indeed, he whispered:

"Is he asleep?"

"Y-e-s!" breathed Timothy.

"We must git out."

"So we must."

"Kin you make a crawl of it?"

"Yes."

"You must go as light as a feather."

"I will, Dickey; I will. Only let me go, an' I'll do it great."

"Ef you git in a panic an' make any noise you'll be killed dead by that awful feller. He will mebbe eat you right up!" cautioned Dickey, bound to impress his aid strongly.

"I'll—I'll—I'll beat a cat!" gasped Timothy, quaveringly.

"Come on!"

Slowly and carefully Dickey worked his way out. The carpet seemed to cling to him dangerously, and his movements were magnified by his fears, but, really, they were doing good work. There was little to tell that anybody was moving, and the deep breathing continued from the bed.

With great patience they neared the door, and still the hull continued. Dickey sought for and found the key. Carefully he turned it in the lock. The bolt shot back with a thud.

"Oh!" breathed Timothy.

His companion, too, had been startled by the noise, but it brought no alarm. All was still by the bed.

Dickey opened the door and they passed out. He reclosed it, and they were free from Lucio's eyes, unless he should arouse suddenly. All this made Timothy brighten up.

"Say, ain't we the boss?" he inquired. "We've done that feller up dead easy. Why, he ain't no sort of match fer us, anyhow, an' I wouldn't be afraid ter fight him all alone— Oh!"

The speaker broke off abruptly. A light shone into the room from the kitchen, and the hearts of the boys took to jumping.

"The old woman!" exclaimed Dickey.

"She's comin' this way."

"Git ter cover!"

There was no time to select a place of concealment with care, but they noted that the table had a drooping cover, and under the table they went in haste.

Hardly had they gained the refuge when the old woman appeared.

She carried a lamp and seemed to be half asleep, but they were not reassured thereby. Why had she come? Had she heard the unlocking of the door? Were they facing discovery?

She stopped in the middle of the room. She held the light up and looked around as if to find something, but she made no forward movement. Devoutly Dickey hoped she would not look their way—he was positive that their legs showed under the table.

She advanced and set the lamp on the table. Her dress swung forward at one point and touched Dickey's foot. Close, indeed, was the peril, and he saw that Timothy looked pale and worried.

Suddenly the woman broke into a chuckle. Something she muttered, but it

was in Italian, and they could not understand it. Then she went to the further side of the room and opened a cupboard door. The boys watched eagerly. This seemed to promise something. What was coming?

She took out a flask and raised it to her lips; she drank heartily. A smile stole over Dickey's face. Worried as he was, he saw the humor of the reaction. She was indulging in a drink of some strong liquor, and it pleased him quite as much as it did her.

When she had satisfied her appetite she replaced the flask and turned around. Once more there was danger that she would see the boys under the table, but she did not. Calmly she walked on, regained her lamp, and then retreated to the kitchen.

She left two much lighter hearts behind.

"Make fer the door!" whispered Timothy, excitedly.

"Stop! Can't we go out by the closet we come in by?"

"They may ketch us."

"Ef we go this way they will find the door unlocked in the morning, an' be dead onder our curves. We must go the other way. Come!"

Dickey led the way, and they gained the closet without delay. It was as they had left it, and they hastened through and gained position in the hall. Then they turned exultant faces upon each other.

"Saved!" breathed Dickey, thankfully.

"Say, wasn't that great?" cried Timothy.

"They won't ever know we've been there."

"Daniel Boone might have done it jest that way."

"Never mind Daniel. I s'pose you want ter go to bed, but I want ter talk a bit with you. Come on down ter the street door. We must think this over. The game ain't played out yet. The fight is just begun."

CHAPTER XIII.

A MATTER OF ROBBERY.

Sam Osborne was slow to awake the next morning. Brave as he was, he had been a good deal shaken by his desperate adventure with Jack Collins up the steeple. This made an impression on him, and it was long before he fell into restful slumber after reaching his boarding place. When he did sleep in earnest it was the deepest sort of sleep.

He woke feeling weary and sore, but not enough so to make him think of giving up his work for the day.

He ate breakfast in a leisurely way, and then, as he was not expected to report until nearly ten o'clock, he sat down to think over the events of the previous night.

He was thus occupied when there was a knock at his door, and the servant who appeared told him there were two gentlemen to see him. He bade her send them up, and Adam Clayton and Professor Thomas Jackson came accordingly.

Sam was instantly alert. It was odd enough to see them together, after the opinion he had formed of the professor, but there was more. Mr. Clayton looked serious and worried, and his gaze did not meet Sam's with the usual frankness.

"Something is up!" thought the Steeple-Climber.

He did not let anything trouble him, outwardly, but requested them to be seated. They obeyed, but Mr. Clayton moved uneasily in his seat. He seemed at a loss what to do, but the professor cleared his throat, meaningly, and the church dignitary finally came to time.

"We are here on business, Mr. Osborne," he announced.

"Something about the steeple?" asked Sam, looking at the professor.

"Hardly that."

"Or the tower?"

"No."

Clayton squirmed again, and Jackson appeared to grow impatient. He waved his hand benignly and spoke in a soft voice common to him.

"In justice to the young man, come to the point, sir," he directed.

"Hem! hem!" muttered Clayton. "I want—that is, we are here—"

He stopped wholly, and the professor again came in mildly.

"We do not advance at all, Mr. Clayton."

"Well, well," desperately exclaimed Clayton; "it is like this: Have you seen a watch in the church, Samuel?"

"Seen a watch in the church!" echoed the Steeple-Climber.

"Yes."

"I fail to understand."

"You should be plain," urged Jackson.

"Then I will. Fact is, Samuel, a watch belonging to me disappeared in the church, yesterday, and one of the workmen says he saw you pick it up and put it in your pocket. He thought—that is, I explained it by supposing you might have mistaken it for your own."

Sam had a brief start, but he was quick to rally. He fixed his gaze on Jackson. Unless he erred there was a plot against him, and the sleek professor was at the bottom of it. It was, he thought, a part of the desperate scheme to keep him from doing his work on the church. Those opposed to him were bound to accomplish their object by some means or other.

It was an accusing gaze he gave to Jackson, but that mild-mannered person was as mild as ever.

"I am not in the habit of pocketing other people's watches," the young man finally answered.

"I am positive you would not do it knowingly, sir, but I thought—having received such information—that you might have done so by error, thinking it your own."

"I carry no watch."

"Then I do not see how it could have happened."

"If your watch is lost, look for it in the pocket of the man who says he saw me take it!" promptly advised Sam.

Jackson's gaze wandered to Clayton. Sam could well believe that the man with the patriarchal beard was dissatisfied with his companion's half-hearted way, but the church officer was a good man, who wanted to wrong nobody, and he was not stirred up by the look.

"I should hesitate to suspect the workman of wrong-doing," he responded, awkwardly.

"Do you suspect me?"

"Bless me, no, indeed! No, indeed! But errors may occur, you know. We all do some things unconsciously, you know."

"Honest men rarely pocket another man's watch unconsciously."

"Of course there is accusation against nobody," hastily declared Mr. Clayton. "Indeed, there is not. But the watch is gone."

Sam turned upon the professor.

"Are you a witness?" he inquired.

"Dear me, no!" exclaimed the professor.

"He merely urged me to come and see you," added Mr. Clayton.

"In the interests of harmony and justice," hastily explained Jackson. "I felt that young Mr. Osborne could clear himself."

"May I ask what you have to do about it, anyhow?" continued Sam, sharply. "Are you an officer of the church? Are you their agent?"

"Neither, sir," gently returned Jack-

son. "I happened to meet Mr. Clayton, and he consulted with me."

It was all that the Steeple-Climber could do to avoid accusing the sleek knave then and there, but he mastered his feelings and turned to Mr. Clayton calmly.

"I know nothing of the watch," he repeated.

"Did you see it at all, at the church?"

"No."

"I laid it down, when up near the tower, while doing some work, and I did not see it again."

"Better ask the workman who saw it disappear and said nothing about it."

"I accuse nobody of dishonesty."

"I would accuse somebody, if I were you."

"Not I, Mr. Osborne; not I. It is gone, but I feel sure it was all an error."

"Are you going to let it go unsought for?"

"If necessary. It may come back to me. If it does not I will bear my loss. I beg, sir, that you will not feel hurt on account of this visit. I felt positive that you were all right, but I thought it no more than justice to us both to call and ask you about it. Now that I have done so I am done. Please pardon me, Samuel, if my course seems unkind, for I meant no harm, and I am still your friend."

It was the manly statement of a good man, but it did not suit Professor Thomas Jackson. He began to move uneasily, and, when Mr. Clayton gave evidence of leaving the room, he hesitatingly remarked:

"You know, Mr. Clayton, that we thought that, in justice to himself, young Samuel should allow us to search his room—"

"I have changed my mind. I'll not search!" declared Clayton, quickly.

"You are at liberty to do so," interrupted Sam. "On the contrary, I request that it be done."

"I will oblige you—"

The professor rose as he spoke thus, but Mr. Clayton broke in:

"Stop! There must be nothing of the sort done. I have full faith in Samuel, and I'll not let you do it, Jackson."

"I have something to say about it," exclaimed Sam. "I want the search made. Kindly keep by my side, Mr. Clayton, and I'll pull my small belongings all to pieces. I want to prove that I have not your watch, by design or mistake. Come!"

He had gone to the church officer's side, and he now exerted a mild but strong pressure to make Clayton accede to his wishes. The latter was not more inclined to comply, and he refused stoutly, but Sam was anxious that the room should be seen to, then and there. He persisted, and, finally, almost dragged Clayton with him.

He was determined that there should be no ground on which to base suspicion.

His belongings were few and simple, and he began to overhaul them, with Clayton by his side. Once he looked back and saw Jackson's eyes glittering in a way very unlike the mild ex-dispenser of cheap bread, but he thought he was going to baffle the professor wholly.

Quickly, but openly, he showed the articles in the bureau drawers, and all went well until the lower one was reached. Then he moved an old shirt and—lo! a watch was under it.

The Steeple-Climber stopped short.

He stared at the timepiece as if it had been a ghost.

Mr. Clayton was looking hard, too, and finally his hand moved forward, and he secured the watch.

"It is mine!" he remarked, in a hushed voice.

Sam's face flushed. His mind became a whirlpool of thoughts. He knew the watch had never gone there by natural means, either by his act or that of anybody else.

"I am in a trap!" he thought.

Mr. Clayton was as kind and forgiving as ever.

"Accidents will happen," he observed, apologetically.

Sam looked at Professor Jackson. Deep exultation was pictured on the man's face. Now all was clear to the Steeple-Climber. He felt sure he knew how the watch had come there, why this visit had taken place.

"Yonder is one of the real thieves!" was his further thought. "The gang is bound to ruin me. I am now an accused criminal!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A DANGEROUS VENTURE.

Deep indignation thrilled the young Steeple-Climber, and his first impulse was to accuse Thomas Jackson then and there, but in a moment more prudence and cunning came to his aid. All things went to show that he was the intended victim of a gang, and they were not without power. He was in a fight with them in which his honor, perhaps, and his liberty, too—was at stake.

Unless he was cautious and skillful he would be overwhelmed by their machinations. He kept his anger down and resolved on another course.

"This amazes me!" he declared, looking at the watch.

"Oh! it is all right," replied Mr. Clayton.

"I had no knowledge of the thing being here."

"It is clear that you picked it up when your mind was on your work and thought no more about it."

"I want to see that workman who says he saw me do it."

"Don't give it a thought, Samuel," advised the church official. "It was only an accident, and I prefer to let it all drop."

"Let it drop!" interrupted Jackson.

"Why, at this rate you will lose all you have, sir. Remember the jewels lost at the party given in honor of your niece. The jewels have not been found, though Samuel pursued the thieves stoutly."

"Never mind."

"I can't understand this watch business," persisted Sam, "but I'm going to think it over more carefully. I will see you again, Mr. Clayton."

"Pooh, pooh! Let it pass. I have the timepiece; I want no more. It was a mere accident. I beg that you will say no more. I am going to the church now. Will you walk with me, Samuel?"

There were still the kindly tone and speech, but Sam knew it was the natural way of the speaker rather than his conviction. Mr. Clayton would have been stupid not to doubt him. That gentleman was not stupid, and the inference was plain. He wanted to drop a bad matter. Sam had seen the change of expression when Jackson spoke of Nina Arvino's lost diamonds. Jackson had intended to associate the two robberies, and he had made a success in impressing the older man.

However, Clayton was still anxious to drop it, and Sam was not ready to spring his own mine, so Jackson was beaten in his desire to see more trouble.

All three left the house together.

The professor was uneasy, and plainly unwilling to leave his companions alone, but, as he could not keep with them all day, he finally took the quickest way out of it.

He said good-day and went his way.

When Sam and Mr. Clayton passed the church door the former turned upon his employer.

"What do you make of this?" he demanded.

"Of what, Samuel?"

"The watch affair."

"Why, my boy, it was all a mistake. Don't let us speak of it. It is a bit embarrassing, but let it drop."

"For to-day it shall rest, but I am not done with it. I did not take it by accident or design. There is a mystery about it, and I'll solve that mystery if I live. Tomorrow I want to see you again about it. I have some things to do first, and I do not want to get rattled until my work of to-day is over, anyhow. Wait, sir, and the affair of the watch will take new shape. I promise you that."

Mr. Clayton had tried in vain to interrupt this rapid outflow of words. Afterward, he was rather glad he had not succeeded. Good-hearted as he was, he had found it hard to explain away the matter of the watch, but Sam had spoken in so manly, straightforward a way that half of his suspicion was removed.

He knew that Jackson was angry because he had not had Sam arrested because of the watch, but now, he was more than ever glad he had not done it.

After a little more talk Sam went to the steeple.

Making sure that the ropes had not been tampered with, he went up to his dizzy height and began the application of paint.

He worked mechanically that day. His mind was a whirl of emotions. Why was this tremendous effort being made to deprive him of his task on the steeple?

Surely not for the money or the renown of the task. Jackson would not care for that, in itself.

"There is a deep mystery about this all," thought the painter, "and the mystery is centered about this very spire. I have heard noises inside. There is something in there. What? That is just what I am going to learn to-night. I suppose that it would be the best way to go to Mr. Clayton and the police with my story, but I have other plans. I want to learn the mystery of this steeple."

He paused and listened. Before, he had heard a laugh and voices inside. What had become of those who had made these sounds? He tried to catch something now, but utter stillness seemed to reign there.

"Maybe I have scared them off," he decided. "Anyhow, I will learn to-night. This mystery shall be settled."

He resumed his work, and the scene of the previous day was again enacted below. People stood and stared at him as he moved around the spire, wondering at his skill and daring. Once more he was likened to a spider in its web, and nearly the whole ward paid tribute to his ability.

New-comers prophesied that he would surely fall, but those who had watched the day before were of another opinion. He had impressed them deeply, and they left off predicting disaster to devote all their time to profound wonder that he could thus swing around the steeple and keep a clear head and whole body.

They little knew what was in his mind, or that his work was so mechanical. They little suspected that he held the key to a secret as strange as it was puzzling, or that he was planning a campaign of a different sort.

When he went down at noon he was accosted by Dickey Pratt. The latter had a story to tell, and it concerned Lucio Zacharelli. The boy was very much excited over his discoveries, and in great fear that Nina Arvino would come to grief, and he had sought Sam as the one best suited to grapple with the conundrum of the hour.

He was not disappointed in seeking sympathy and interest from the Steeple-Climber; but, fortunately, Sam did not find the new case so hard to deal with as the first. He advised Dickey, and to the point.

"You must go to the police with this," he asserted.

"Is that best?"

"Certainly. Lucio Zacharelli must not work his vendetta in New York, and he should be nipped in the bud. See Adam Clayton and let him know all. That will be better than for you to go to the police. Then Mr. Clayton can protect his niece."

"I sorter wanted to fight it out with Zacharelli myself, an' I thought mebbe you'd help me, but I'll do as you say."

"Do you want to work with me?"

"Yes. You bet I do."

"Can you do a midnight job with me?"

"Sure!"

"Then meet me at my boarding place at eleven to-night."

"I'll be there, sure pop."

This point settled, they separated. Sam had his dinner, and, in due time, returned to work.

That afternoon he swung about on the steeple as before, and below he had the admiring audience, but up his way there was nothing suspicious. Not a sound penetrated from the spire.

"I'm afraid I have scared them off," he thought.

Evening brought no changes, but, when the regular duties were past, Sam prepared for other work. This time he did not intend to go to the church unarmed, and he went to a second-hand gun store and secured a good revolver and plenty of ammunition.

"If Jack Collins molests me this time it will go hard with him!" was the Steeple-Climber's resolution.

Dickey was not late, and the two friends were soon on their way to the old church. On the way Sam told enough to interest Dickey and put him on his guard, though he did not mention his belief that the steeple held any secret.

It was to learn whether such a secret existed that they were going there now, and he thought it time enough to make confidants when the investigation had been made.

The church was duly reached, and with his key Sam passed inside. He and Dickey seemed to have it all to themselves, but the Steeple-Climber had called for no conversation and extreme caution about making other betraying sounds.

He had learned the way well, and in the dark he and Dickey crept up to the base of the steeple. Thus far nothing had been seen or heard, but, keeping in the darkness, Sam crouched at the intersecting point and waited and listened long.

Utter silence prevailed. Then he lighted his lantern.

"Hold this, Dickey," he directed. "I am going to do some carpenter's work."

"You be?"

"Yes. See there! Does it look as if anybody could go up that steeple inside?"

"Why, a year-old kid couldn't do it!" declared Dickey.

"It does look so to the eye, but signs are often deceptive. I am here to go up that steeple, and I'll begin now."

CHAPTER XV.

SOMEBODY IS MISSING.

Wide were Dickey's eyes, and he seriously confessed:

"I don't see what the dickens you want ter do that fer, but I s'pose you do."

"There may be something more up there than vacancy."

"What?"

"Just what I want to know," Sam replied.

With this non-committal speech the Steeple-Climber went about his work. As has before been mentioned, the lower part of the steeple was several feet in diameter, but the mouth was so choked up with cross-timbers that nothing could be seen above, and it seemed impossible for any one to ascend.

Armed with a short crowbar, Sam began to test these timbers. If they were what they seemed he was to have his labor all for nothing, but he was not without hope of better results, so he pried at the timbers, working first from one point and then from another, until watching Dickey suddenly exclaimed:

"Say, you might as well try ter tumble the whole steeple over. Them was fixed in to stay."

"We will see."

Zealously the speaker kept to work, but he had seen no sign of success when, by mere accident, he struck a small piece of timber well up in the mass and it rattled and fell to his feet. It left the cross-timbers swaying to and fro as if all were about to fall.

He extended his hand and seized hold of the mass. He pulled, and there was increasing swaying, but nothing more came of it. He felt sure, however, that he was before a cunning device to baffle just such investigation.

"Another loosening like that would give me access," he thought.

This thought brought a second idea. He felt on the opposite side and found another block like the first. He pulled at it; it gave way; it fell down; the whole structure around it would have fallen had not Sam caught it. He lowered it to the floor and then looked up.

Above him was a clear road to the higher part of the spire.

"I've found it," he muttered.

"Found what?" asked wondering Dickey.

"Hist!"

Sam put his head partially up the aperture and listened. Not the least sound was to be heard, then, and though he remained inactive for several minutes, the same stillness prevailed.

He stood erect and raised his lantern. Above him rose a regular flight of steps. If he had tried to convince himself that the original builders had made the steps he would have been undeceived by the fact that they differed in all ways from the other material around them.

He knew then that somebody had built this stairway at no very distant date.

All of his suspicions were now fully confirmed.

Except for a short distance there was the deepest sort of darkness above, and the only way to learn more was to go up. Before night had fallen he decided that if anybody had been up in the spire they had been scared off, but this was not certain. He wished he had an older ally present, and somebody that could back him up in case of danger or a fight, but it was too late to think of it then.

Dickey was his only aid, and he was determined that the boy should not go into peril. He turned to him slowly.

"I'm going up there," he announced.

"Well, it's the queerest place I ever seen, but why be you so much interested? Do tell me about it! What's up there? What do you expect ter find?"

"Oh! it's just to satisfy my curiosity. I never was up there, you know, and I have a notion to go; that's all. Do you stay right here and wait for me. But you'll be in the dark. Are you afraid?"

"Ginger! Why should I be? Guess you don't know me. Afraid? Not ef Hannah knows herself, by jing!"

"All right; here I go."

Sam went a short distance and then turned and added:

"If there is anything goes wrong, do you hurry out of the church and make yourself safe."

Dickey was too much surprised by this repeated warning to speak at once, and by the time he had recovered his power of speech his associate was toiling upward. Dickey looked after him. The light of the lantern revealed the steps and the many cross-timbers, but, thick as the latter looked to Dickey to be, Sam found no trouble in passing along between them.

He rose higher and higher until his ally lost sight of him and there was only the dullest sort of a glow above.

"By jing!" muttered Dickey; "I wish I was along, too. Why couldn't he have took me? I guess I like strange things as well as he does. Never mind; he'll come back, and then I'll go up. Queer that they should build steps in there, an' then fasten folks out with that mass o' timber that Sam had ter move away first of all."

Trying to curb his curiosity, Dickey sat down and waited for the expected chance to satisfy his own ambitions in the same way.

"I wonder who told Sam about this?" he proceeded. "He couldn't have guessed it all himself, though his adventures up there with Jack Collins may hev' given him some suspicions. Ginger! but ain't that Jack a bad one! Don't know as I want ter be a steeple-climber, ef they hev' sech adventures."

Meditating thus, the boy kept quiet through several minutes, but, as the time passed on and he saw and heard nothing from his friend, he grew impatient.

He peered up the interior of the spire, but not even the faintest ray of light was to be seen.

"The cross-timbers must be mighty thick up there," he soliloquized. "But what is Sam doin' all this while? Why don't he come back?"

This last question grew more striking as other minutes went by. Sam came not, and Dickey began to wonder in earnest.

"I should be worried ef there was anything up there ter hurt him, but there ain't anything. He will come when he gets ready."

But Sam came not and time enough finally passed so that the waiting ally grew alarmed.

"Somethin' has happened ter him, sure pop!" he mentally declared. "Can there be gas up there? Don't know why there should be. Has he fainted, or somethin'? I wouldn't think o' his doin' that, but he has got inter trouble, sure as I'm in the steeple!"

Dickey stood erect and peered up into the profound darkness. The stillness above was so death-like that, coupled with Sam's absence, it began to worry him seriously. Sam was a substantial young man, and he could not fade away into nothingness or leave the spire by any other avenue. He would not play a joke, so there was only one way of explaining it all.

"He's got inter difficulty o' the worst sort," thought the boy, anxiously. "He may be dead. By jing! I ain't goin' to stay here like a clam an' do nothin'. I'll go up an' see about it."

It was not a pleasant task. The profound darkness was awe-inspiring and the way an unknown one. Older and bolder persons than Dickey might well have refused utterly to take the risk, but he was a loyal friend, and he was determined not to neglect what he thought his duty.

He began the hazardous attempt.

"This is an awful mystery, but here

goes ter solve it. I hope Sam Osborne isn't dead!"

He felt for and found the first step, and then the ascent was begun. It was very slow work, and the timbers often obstructed his progress, but he was not long in finding that if he went in just the right direction there was ample room for him to go up.

Slowly, carefully, feeling out the position of each step, and expecting all sorts of things to occur each moment, he rose in the spire to solve the mystery of Sam's disappearance.

CHAPTER XVI.

DICKEY'S DISCOVERIES.

"Ginger! ef this isn't dark, then black don't mean dark. Dark! Why, it's thicker than cheese. A black cat would light it up in here 'most as much as an electric light."

Thus thought Dickey as he slowly and laboriously progressed up the spire. He had hoped that he would come upon Sam, but this did not occur. He found nothing but the timbers that crossed each other here and there.

He grew more worried and stopped. He listened, but heard nothing. The silence frightened him. He could not understand such uncanny things. It was almost past belief, and wholly past understanding.

Now he remembered Sam Osborne's serious air and suggestive words before that young man started on his own errand. "These things began to take on new meaning, and the steeple became filled, in his imagination, with strange and awful terrors.

Summoning his courage anew, he started on, but had gone only a few feet when he bumped his head against a timber. He felt for a way around it, but found none. There were small crevices, but, except for them, the passage appeared to come to an end.

Suddenly remembering that he had a few matches, he lighted one. By its brief gleam he looked up.

"By jing! I can't get no further!" he exclaimed, aloud. "The hole ends here; this is the last of it."

The light faded away, but it left on his mind a picture of a tolerably wide space between the walls of the steeple, with the space between filled in with cross-timbers. More, it left him bewildered beyond power of expression. Sam Osborne had gone up the same way he had traveled. What had become of Sam? It seemed impossible for him to have passed the point where Dickey then stood.

"There ain't any winders in the outside o' the steeple, an' he couldn't get out that way, but he's gone. Is he up above? Does this obstruction move like the other? It don't seem possible; it don't look like it. I guess he must hev' fainted on his way up. I'll work along down, an' mebbe I'll find him hung up on a timber somewheres."

Dickey went slowly down, lighting matches as he went, and then peering into the recesses of the spire, but he saw nothing of his friend.

When his feet again touched the tower base his matches were gone and he was not one whit the wiser.

"By jing!" he murmured; "this is awful! Sam is a goner! He's dead an' buried— Pshaw! I'm rattled; that's what I am! But what has become o' Sam?"

It was no longer a calm, logical view that he took of the case. He looked up into that black expanse and reflected how Sam had disappeared there, strangely and unaccountably, and the boy became panic-stricken and scared. Never before had darkness seemed so grewsome, and

he expected every moment that some terrible monster would spring out and seize him.

"Sam's dead! I'll skip!" he cried, and with this he hastened toward the floor of the church.

The expected monster did not appear, and he reached the outer door in safety. The key was still on the inside, where Sam had left it. Dickey turned it and the fresh air and light of the street rushed in to meet him. It was a welcome meeting with old friends, and he appreciated them as he had never done before.

Safety cleared his head.

"Sam's gone!" he muttered, in a business-like, though agitated way. "What am I to do about it?"

He found it hard to decide. The expedition to the church had been secret. To go to a policeman or one of the church officers would be to reveal what he knew Sam had wished should be kept secret.

For a considerable time he was at fault, but he finally brightened up and turned the key in the lock.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "It ain't a long ways ter where Timmy O'Meara lives. I'll go there and make him take his lantern an' come with me. There must be a way ter git further up that steeple than I went jest now, an' I'm goin' ter find it. Up I go! The light will help me out. That's the figger!"

He left the building, relocked the door and hastened off.

He expected to go several blocks, for the O'Meara residence was not close at hand, but he had walked only a few minutes when he suddenly happened on Timothy himself, who was partially concealed in a doorway. Dickey stopped short.

"Hello!" he cried. "That you? What ye doin' out so late as this?"

Romantic young Mr. O'Meara swooped down upon his friend and caught him by the arm.

"Hist! hist!" he exclaimed. "The dead dark hour of night conceals many a lawless plot. Not thrice the clock has struck sence dark-browed men hev' passed athwart my vision—"

"Take a reef in ye'r sails, Timmy. What's up?"

"Say, do you see that buildin' across the way?"

"Sure, but I see little more about it. Wait! That's the buildin' where Lucio Zacharelli has his office as a padrone!"

"Yes. That's the office on the second floor. We could see right inter it ef we was on a level with it, fer the electric light shines directly in. Dickey, there has been strange things done there this night. Lucio has been there with his dark-browed bravos, an' they have been in a panic. Don't know what they've done, but they've turned the place inside out an' skipped."

"Be calm! I guess there ain't nothin' much up."

"Le's go in an' see. They forgot ter lock the outside door, an' we kin race in an' take a good look—"

"I don't see any horse-sense in it, unless there is more than you have rattled off in ye'r excitement, but I'll do it on one condition. As soon as we've gone in will you help me in a work of mine?"

"Sure!"

"Heave ahead, then!"

Timothy looked delighted, and they ran across the street. As Tim had said, the street door was not locked. They entered the hall, reclosed the door and then ascended the stairs. When the upper hall was reached they found one door open, and Timothy promptly identified it as Lucio Zacharelli's. They entered.

The electric light outside filled the room with light equal to day.

Thus far Dickey had acted only to please his ally, but he now looked with some curiosity. The room was an ordinary office. At one side of the window was a desk, and at the rear was a longer table, while a few chairs and a stool made up the furnishing of the place.

The desk told nothing unusual, for there was a file of papers in orderly array, and an ink bottle with pen still in it, and a ledger or two, but at the rear it was different. Papers were strewn over the table and on the floor.

"Went in haste, I guess," commented Dickey.

"That's why I suspect them. They seemed ter be in a panic."

"What's all these papers?" asked Dickey, as he picked up a handful. "Humph! Letter from a man who wants help ter work on a railroad in Virginia. Ditto a man in Kentucky. Nothin' but just Lucio's business correspondence."

"Some o' these letters may conceal dark an' deadly crimes, comrade. Let us look further. What's this?"

"Anything interestin'?"

"Why, this letter has the name of Sam, the Steeple-Climber, in it. Says they must do him up right away—"

"What's that?"

Dickey snatched the letter without ceremony. He quickly took in its beginning and end.

"To Lucio from Jack Collins! Mighty poor fist he makes o' writin'. Say, what's this? By jing! this letter means business."

"What does it say?" asked Tim, peering forward.

Dickey was looking at the sheet with expanded eyes and an air of excitement. Suddenly he broke forth again.

"Jack Collins, Lucio an' Professor Jackson are all mixed up in a plot ter do mischief."

"I knew there was a dark an' deadly plot!" cried Timothy delighted.

"Look!" cried Dickey. "Sam, the Steeple-Climber, is in deadly peril. The bravos are to attack him."

"Whew!"

"Jack says that the professor has tried ter git Sam accused of theft, an' it has failed. Now he asks Lucio to set his men onter Sam. Seems Jack has promised Lucio some room somewheres to imprison somebody that Lucio wants to get out o' the way, and he asks the padrone to pay off the debt by doin' Sam up. Look! Look!"

"What, Dickey?"

"It is Nina Arvino that the padrone wants ter shut up. Of course; we've heard of that before. But this says the work is ter be done this very night."

"Ginger!"

"Tim, you must hustle to the police an' tell them ter run ter Adam Clayton's like the mischief. They must keep Nina from bein' stole by that skunk of a Lucio. Will you do it?"

"Sure!"

"That's your job. Mine is to help Sam. He's in trouble, though I don't know how. Get out o' here!"

They dashed out of the office and soon stood on the street again.

"Away!" added Dickey. "Run ter the police station. Don't lose a minute. I'm off the other way. I go to save Sam!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRET OF THE SPIRE.

And what had become of Sam, the Steeple-Climber? He had gone into the heart of the spire and disappeared from sight and sound. What was the explanation of the mystery?

He went up equipped with revolver and lantern. The former was in his pocket, and he did not expect to be called upon

to use it. All things, according to his belief, went to show that the men of the steeple had deserted their roost. What he did expect was to find traces of past occupancy.

When he left Dickey he kept his lantern well up and moved on steadily. There was every evidence that much care had been given to fitting up the aerial refuge. None of the original timbers had been displaced for some distance, but the steps wound around among them with skillful construction.

This lasted only a short time. Presently his head rose above a specially crooked series of steps and he stopped short. A regular room was before him.

The cross-timbers had been removed to the great peril of the spire, and a floor laid. There was a room, small, but fairly comfortable, with blankets spread on the floor and some trivial articles scattered here and there.

"Aha!" muttered the investigator; "so I have found a living room up here. No wonder there were laughs and voices from the steeple. It was somebody's home before they were scared off."

A ladder rose still higher, and up this Sam soon mounted. His zeal was increasing, and he was ready for all sorts of discoveries.

Another regular floor was above him, and when he brought his head above it he saw a scene little to be expected. No lounging room was this, but a storehouse, it seemed. Narrow shelves were fitted into the wall, and all of these were piled high with articles of merchandise.

He saw suits of men's clothing, dresses and silks for the use of ladies, and numerous articles of service to one sex or the other, all being of such a nature as to suggest that no small sum of money ever had purchased them.

Sam was quick to take a hint, and he mentally exclaimed:

"I have solved the secret of the steeple. No honest person would have a storehouse up here—this is the lair of a gang of thieves."

Quickly the events of the past flashed through his mind. When he first came to the vicinity he had heard it said, and the fact had been mentioned at the evening party when Nina Arvino lost her diamonds, that the ward had been scourged by a pest of thieves. Houses and stores of all sorts had been broken into, and the goods and the thieves remained unfound.

"Now," thought Sam, "I know why they were so anxious to keep me away from the steeple!"

"They!" The word called up more definite suspicions. It had been Jack Collins and Professor Thomas Jackson who had tried so hard to buy him off or to scare, argue or drive him from the job. At all times he had wondered why Jack was so wild to get the contract for the work on the spire.

They had not wanted a stranger around their lair, lest he should solve their secret by chance.

It was solved now; Sam knew he had found the quarters of the house thieves of the ward.

"They made a big fight to frighten me off," he murmured, "but when they saw that it could not be done, they fled themselves. They did not take their goods along. They knew it would be risky, and, no doubt, they thought it very unlikely that this den would be found. Aha, Professor Thomas Jackson, I think I understand your noble benevolence of dispensing cheap bread to the poor. It was a cover for your thieves' den, and an excuse for you to hold possession of the church. I now set you down as the brains

of the gang, and Jack Collins as the active worker."

Sam was exultant, but he saw there was more to do.

Another ladder and another floor, above, told of more to come.

He climbed quickly up the steps, holding his lantern above his head. He would have done well to go slower.

His head rose above the floor.

Hark! Was that a stir in the compartment? He stopped and looked around sharply. A shadowy form—another! He raised his foot to beat a hurried retreat—then a sharp pain shot through his head. After that—oblivion!

The next thing that Sam knew he was lying on his back with the glare of light in his eyes and several men bending over him. There was confusion in his mind, but he had reason enough to use his eyes to good purpose. He recognized Jack Collins!

His start, his expression and his manner told this, and Jack broke into a low laugh.

"Well, my laddy, how is it?" sneered the rough.

Sam struggled to rise, but the effort was wholly unsuccessful. He discovered that he was bound hand and foot, and rendered helpless. He sank back, and then Jack laughed mockingly.

"That's it; you may as well keep quiet. How do you like meddling with other people's business?"

The Steeple-Climber rallied with surprising quickness.

"I can truthfully say I did not expect to find anybody here," he responded.

"And I can jest as truthfully say we wasn't prepared fer ye'r visit to us. We relied too much on the patent contrivance that stopped up the mouth of the den. We had another similar concern for a higher point, but it was not in place. It has been fitted now, an' ef anybody else tries ter come up he won't find no way."

Sam thought of Dickey, and realized that his ally was cut off.

There was one other man besides Jack with him. The former was the ruling spirit, however, and he was in such an exultant mood that he proceeded to talk rapidly.

"I like this better than fightin' on the steeple's outside, but maybe you don't. I hev' the hip-lock on ye this time, Sammy! I kin chuck you over inter the street without your bein' able ter resist, an' that is jest what I mean ter do!"

"Throw me to my death?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember that I saved your life, the night we fought before?"

"Can't help it. Business is business."

Sam was silent. He was exasperated that he should have fallen into the clutches of his foe, and not in a frame of mind to talk. Jack, however, was eager to speak.

"Of course you've got onter our curves," he proceeded. "I don't need ter deny that this is the refuge of a band of lifters. We steal things, everywhere, and hide our loot up here."

Sam was willing to draw him on.

"This thing amazes me."

"Simple enough," responded Jack. "You see, I am captain of the band, but another man is manager. He is a genius, and as slick a carpenter as I ever seen. It was him who made this den, an' fixed the stops in the cavity to conceal it. He had to take out some of the cross-timbers, an' the spire ain't so strong as it might be, but it has stood the strain so fer."

"A wonderful refuge."

"We have four rooms in all. The two upper ones are mere holes, an' three o' the total are storerooms. This is the

biggest, an' the livin' room. You will see it's mighty small, but it takes in all the spire. The spire is bigger than the average, anyhow, or we should not have any room. We can jest lay down here. But, say, ain't it a great old den, though?"

"Remarkable."

"Up above, we have goods stored that are worth thousands of dollars. When we have a good chance we sell what's in stock, but there's something on hand all the time, and it's rich stuff."

"You talk too much!" growled Jack's companion.

"Why?"

"Suppose he goes an' tells all this?"

"He never will!" asseverated Jack, his face darkening. "Do you know why? I'll tell ye. He's about done. Do you think I would let such a dangerous feller live? Not I!"

"We can't do him up here."

"Do ye remember the night you made the raid over in Jersey City? Do you remember what I was doin' then? That's the night Sam an' me fought on the spire, an' I tried ter throw him off. I failed that night; I shall not fail this time!"

"Do you really intend to throw him off?"

"Yes."

"From the tower?"

"Yes. He will go down kerplunk, an' then what will be left of him? Will he ever give us away?"

"No."

"Down he goes, an' before another hour has passed. Pretty soon I'll go out ter see ef the coast is clear. Sam, did you come here alone?"

"Yes," the Steeple-Climber replied, unhesitatingly.

"I thought so. As soon as we caught you we closed up the cavity with our upper stopper, and it wasn't sure, but we didn't hear nobody else. Thank you fer bein' so obligin' with ye'r answers. It is well ter die in good form, an' I'll now chuck you off the tower!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CRISIS OF THE CASE.

Jack Collins arose. He was not jesting; that was plainly evident, and Sam felt his nerves tingle with genuine apprehension. To be thrown off of the tower meant certain death, and Jack was going to try and carry out his plan. In fact, it was about the only thing he could do, now that Sam was in their thieves' crib.

The peril was not to be disputed, and Sam began to consider earnestly whether he had any hope of escape. If the crook told the truth they had not seen anybody else about the premises. Where was Dickey Pratt?

Sam believed he knew his ally well enough to be sure he would not deliberately desert a friend in need, but Dickey was only a boy, and might not grasp the situation.

Help was needed badly, and needed at once. Would Dickey be able to give it?

"Watch this feller sharp!" directed Jack, and he moved down the steps below the floor. "I'm going ter see if we can finish him off, right away!"

Sam was soon alone with the second man. He improved the chance to talk with that person. He had a face no more prepossessing than Jack's, but in such an emergency it would not do to let any chance pass by. So the Steeple-Climber began an earnest effort to move the captor to pity, speaking of the love of life all men have, and of the cruelty of sending any one to such a death.

He might as well have kept silent.

The rough simply scoffed at his plea.

It did not take much of this useless effort to satisfy Sam, and he relapsed into

silence. The second man had been told to keep sharp watch of him, but he did not seem to take this literally, or else he was too much worried to maintain a stolid demeanor. He spent most of his time at the top of the steps, looking down and listening.

The Steeple-Climber, thus left comparatively free, was not idle. He was bound, but he did not let the idea get into his mind that he was hopelessly helpless. Every moment that he was free from the captor's gaze he twisted at his bonds, seeking to loosen them.

He did not feel any giving way, but he persevered when it was possible.

Presently Jack Collins reappeared.

"The coast is clear," he announced, lightly.

"Be you really goin' ahead?" asked his ally.

"Sure!"

"It is mighty dangerous."

"Not a bit. The moment he strikes the sidewalk it will all be over. People will say he come up here an' fell off by accident. Of course, we will make sure no cop is in sight before we toss him off. Now, I'll gag him."

"Then they will know he didn't fall by chance."

"Say, you are precious dull, Mart. Shall I leave the gag on him? Shall I leave the bonds on him? Not much! They will have to be taken off before he is thrown down, but we don't want to give him more than one chance to yell before he goes over. See?"

"Can you make it a go?"

"Wait an' see."

Jack prepared the gag and adjusted it. He did this with easy nonchalance, but that he was not so much at ease as he wished to appear was shown by another visit to the tower. He came back in haste.

"Nobody in sight," he reported, "an' we will end it as soon as possible. Now, Mart, listen to my plan. When we get him down we will first slip off the bonds, and then the gag. The instant the gag is off he must be pushed over. See?"

"Won't he make a dence of a fight of it when his bonds are off?"

"Hush up! We can manage him easy. Now, down with him."

They lost no more time, and Sam was taken down the steps. He remained passive under this ordeal. He had decided on his course, and was saving his strength for the supreme crisis.

They reached the tower-base, and a look over showed no sign of any one.

"Off with the bonds!" directed Jack Collins. "I'll untie them. Hold him fast, Mart."

Sam was wily. He settled back, as if overwhelmed by the danger, and a faint meaning from his lips was the only sign of life.

Jack freed his feet, and then hurriedly untied his hands.

"Hold him tight, Mart!" was the additional caution.

It was well needed. Sam had waited for this crisis; now he stirred into sudden life, acting with cunning and skill. His first move was to send out one of his feet in a vicious kick. It took Mart in the stomach and knocked him back against the parapet.

Another quick motion and the Steeple-Climber was on his feet.

"I have something to say here!" he cried.

Jack was within reach, and he received a swift blow from Sam's steel-like fist, but it resulted in no disablement. Jack was of the very toughest of material, and accustomed to brawls, and as he realized the situation he stirred into action.

"At him, Mart!" he gasped, and then

set the example by leaping upon the Steeple-Climber.

Mart was not badly injured, and was quick to give his aid. The two roughs attacked the single man with fierce and vicious determination.

Sam remained cool in this emergency, and, keeping both men in front of him, showered blows upon them stoutly, but he had to deal with hard fighters, and they pressed him hotly.

The old tower had never seen a scene like that before, and it was more like a struggle of madmen than anything else, to look at. To Sam it was a fight for life, and he fought as he never had done before.

"Over with him, Mart!" gasped Jack, breathing hard.

"Back, back!" cautioned Sam.

"Together, together!" urged Jack. "Now!"

They prepared for a rush, but Sam now made his supreme effort. Before, he had acted almost wholly on the defensive. Now he assumed the offensive, and his nerve-strong arms rained blow after blow upon them. Mart was knocked down and left insensible, and it then was again man to man.

"I have you!" cried Sam, exultantly.

"Yes, an' we're in the game, too. Whoop! Count us in!"

It was a wild sound from one side, and Dickey Pratt rushed forward, with three policemen at his back.

"Go in, my bold heroes!" added the boy, jubilantly. "I guess this game is about played out, an' our side takes the cake. Whoop!"

It was "about played out," for, quickly, both Jack and Mart were prisoners. It was a victory well won and well earned.

It was not the only capture of the night. Lucio Zacharelli had made his attack and tried to abduct Nina, but had been captured by the police, with his gang, on information given by Timothy O'Meara. The next morning Professor Jackson was arrested, and all of the mischief-makers were under lock and key.

It was found that Lucio had been an ally of the professor, like Jack Collins and his companions, but it was Jackson who planned all. He was the master schemer.

Jackson, Zacharelli, Collins and Mart were tried, convicted and sent to prison on long sentences.

The thieves' lair in the old steeple was the sensation of the hour, and Sam received full credit for his share in breaking up the gang. Jackson confessed that he, not Sam, stole the watch, and that he secretly placed it in Sam's room to ruin the latter.

Another sensation was the finding of Nina Arvino's diamonds in the steeple. Jack Collins had been the thief.

The spire was repaired and re-strengthened, and Sam finished painting the exterior in peace. Great was his renown in that ward. He still keeps at his calling, and Dickey Pratt is now his apprentice. Often the newspapers tell of their daring and skill in dangerous work, and as expert laborers and excellent citizens both rank high.

THE END.

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